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CONFIDENTIAL

TALES OF THE TERROR-FILLED UNKNOWN

# FEAR!

JULY 1960 35 CENTS

BEHIND HIS QUIET MASK,  
MADNESS FESTERS--  
AND TWO WOMEN ARE FATED TO  
**DIE WITH THE NIGHT**

## THE VEILED WOMAN

SHE ATE NOT FLESH  
NOR DRANK OF BLOOD  
YET SLOWLY DRAINED  
HIS LIFE AWAY...

BONUS NOVELETTE:  
**A ROBERT HICHENS FEAR CLASSIC**

FEAR!

35 CENTS



# Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy ... until they try my method!



**But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the other men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.**

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy new lure. I have no reels or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that most fishermen say are fished out and come in with a good catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, or seining. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes — twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers — but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too — in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they were public guides, they

rarely divulged their method to their patrons. They used it only when fishing for their own tables. It is possible that no man on your waters has ever **seen it**, ever **heard of it**, or ever **used it**. And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as closed-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish within a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the country and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer. My method will be disclosed only to those men in each area who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your local waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method for the whole fishing season without risking a penny of your money. Send your name for details of my money-back trial offer. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic — until you decide to try my method! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

**ERIC A. FARE, Highland Park 33, Ill.**

**ERIC A. FARE, Highland Park 33, Illinois**

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from waters many say are "fished out," even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name.....

Address.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

# FEAR!

JULY 1960 VOL. 1, Number 2.

Confession .....	4	HENRY SCHARF <i>Publisher</i>
by <i>James Harvey</i>		
Account Closed .....	8	SHELDON WAX <i>Editorial Director</i>
by <i>David Mason</i>		
The Veiled Woman .....	13	J. WILLIAM LUSZCZ <i>Art Director</i>
by <i>Larry Bearson</i>		
The Cage .....	26	JOSEPH L. MARX <i>Editor</i>
by <i>Bryce Walton</i>		
End With The Night .....	35	RICHARD ACTIS-GRANDE <i>Assoc. Editor</i>
by <i>Donald Honig</i>		
Still Life .....	49	SID MILLER <i>Ass. Art Director</i>
by <i>Mark Richards</i>		
The Persuader .....	58	HARRY W. BROWN <i>Production Director</i>
by <i>Irving Schiffer</i>		
The Idol .....	75	ADVERTISING OFFICES: MANAGER OF ADVERTISING: Irving Mallon, 270 Madison Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.; Telephone: MU 9-0700.
by <i>Joe Mackey</i>		
Bourbon On A Champagne Carpet .	82	WESTERN ADVERTISING MAN- AGER: Jim Going, 8732 Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, Calif. Telephone: OLEander 5-8808.
by <i>Albert Bermel</i>		
How Love Came To Professor Guildea .....	86	MIDWESTERN ADVERTISING MANAGER: Richard Leader, 9 South Clinton Street, Room 324, Chicago, Ill. Tele- phone: DEarborn 2-5820. Detroit: Irving Mallon, 270 Madison Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.
by <i>Robert Hichens</i>		

FEAR! Volume 1, No. 2. Published bi-monthly by Great American Publications, Inc., 10 Ferry St., Concord, N. H. Editorial and Business offices, 270 Madison Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues, \$4.00; single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Application to mail at second-class postage rates is pending at Concord, New Hampshire. Characters in this magazine are fictitious and have no relation to any person living or dead. Copyright 1960 by Great American Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A. Newsstand distribution by Kable News Co.





# CONFESSION

by James Harvey

**D**EATH held Morton Greely by the hand and started away with him.

"Not now," Morton cried, "I'm not ready!"

"No one is," said Death.

"Just give me another hour . . . one little hour . . . please!"

"Too late."

"Have mercy! I still have a confession to make!"

"Too late."

The darkness was growing darker and the wind was cold.

Morton struggled but the grasp of Death held. "A half hour!" he wept. "Just a half hour!"

Death stopped and gazed at him with socketless eyes and through its unmoving mouth its hollow voice spoke; "How desperate you are. I will now show you that I am the most merciful of the world's elements. I will give you your one half hour more. . . . And that is all."

"Thank you! Thank you!" Morton cried out to the fading specter.

As Morton flickered back into life again he heard the clock strike three. On the half hour bell then, he thought, only until then. The bedside seemed crowded but when he opened his eyes painfully he could see it was only the doctor and his lawyer looking grimly down.

"My God," the doctor was saying, "for a minute there . . ."

"I did," Morton gasped. "By three thirty I will be dead."

The two men stared at him strangely. "How do you feel sir?"

"Dying you fool! How else could I feel?" He coughed dryly and then added impatiently; "Has Alvin come yet?"

"He'll be here in a few minutes," the lawyer answered.

"Few minutes? I haven't got a few minutes to spare . . . Tell me . . . are you sure the will is iron-clad? Everyone will get what I gave them?"

The lawyer cleared his throat. "Yes sir," he said, "One tenth goes to your wife and child and the rest . . ."

"Goes to Alvin," the dying man sighed with relief.

"But don't you think, sir . . . " the lawyer began.

"I tell you that's the way I want it! A tenth of my estate will keep my wife and child in comfort. Alvin deserves the luxuries . . ."

There was a movement in the hallway and then a sound of feet walking across the rich carpet of the room. Alvin, his bookkeeper, was now standing where the doctor stood, trying to smile. "Hello Mr. Greely."

"Mr. Greely . . . you've known me long enough to call me by my first name . . ."

"Yes sir . . . Morton."

"Now will everyone else leave the room?"

There was a shuffling of feet as the doctor and the lawyer left.

"Well Morton . . ." Alvin began, "I'm sure that you'll be . . ."

Morton held up his hand. "Please . . . no small talk . . . I haven't much time. . . . I have a confession to make to you."

"A confession?"

Morton tried to force the words from his mouth, the words that he had kept within him so long, the shameful confession. He focused the thin, wasted-looking bookkeeper in his eyes. He looked more like a corpse himself with his sunken cheeks and empty eyes. I did that to him, Morton thought, it was I. "It was I!" Morton cried aloud.

"You?"

"That made you the way you are . . . that broke you!"

Alvin sat on a chair, his face impassive and waiting.

"But first," Morton continued, "let me tell you this . . . I am willing you nine tenths of my estate . . . everything . . ."

"Why that's . . ."

"Close to five million dollars," Morton added. "And even if it's contested, it will hold up in court. I had the lawyers see to that."

"You said you had a confession to make," Alvin said without emotion.

"I see . . . you're suspicious . . . you have every right to be . . ." The words came painfully; Remember when you went to prison. . .?"

"Can I ever forget that? Fifteen years for a murder I didn't commit."

"I killed that man," Morton said. "I took what little money he had so it would look like robbery. I never knew you would be blamed."

There was silence in the room that smelt of medicines, dust and death. Alvin sat still in his chair. "Why did you kill him?"

"It was robbery."

"A few dollars?"

"No! Millions! He was an inventor. He had discovered a new process . . . the process that I built my industry on . . . but he wanted too much money . . . more than I could ever have at that moment."

"You killed him for that?"

"Please don't judge me! I'll face the Supreme Judge soon enough. Maybe it was meant to be this way . . . to suddenly become sick of something the doctors can't even find out . . . maybe it's even Fate."

"No," Alvin said, "it's poison."

"What?"

"It's an odorless, tasteless and undetectable new poison that I've been feeding you for weeks. You see, I knew it was you who killed that man. I could've told the police but they wouldn't believe me and besides, you always did have an annoying conscience. But I couldn't wait for you to die. So, you see, I hurried the process along."

Morton gasped and stared at him wide eyed. "Not yet . . . I have time . . . I have time. . . ." He pushed the buzzer at his bedside. The doctor and lawyer opened the door and rushed in. As he was about to speak he heard it, the half hour bell ringing softly in the hallway. Someone touched him. Turning he saw Death.

"Your time is up," Death said. "Come along."



# ACCOUNT CLOSED

**by David Mason**

## **OLD FIRM TO CHANGE HANDS**

Boston, Mass., Feb. 18; Control of the long-established drug manufacturing firm, Barcroft Chemicals, was assumed today by Arthur Kelman, a New York financier. Majority interest in the firm had been held in the Barcroft family since its founding in 1845. The late John Barcroft, III, president of the firm until his death in September, was the only surviving member of the family.

Mr. Kelman said today that he intends to completely reorganize the firm. He stated that complete modernization of methods and policies would result in higher stockholder profits and improved service.

While Mr. Kelman, at 32, is still a young man, he has gained a considerable reputation in financial circles. At a meeting of Barcroft investors, held today in the company's century-old offices on State Street, complete confidence was expressed in the Kelman management.

Present value of the company's assets and plant is not known; however, on the New York exchange. . . .

MEMO: FROM ARTHUR KELMAN, TO WAREHOUSE DEPARTMENT.

RE: STANDING ORDER NUMBER E-4, SABAZIUS.

The books show a standing order under the above name and number, but I cannot find the original order, nor the address of the consignee, "Sabazius." Apparently this order is being shipped out around the first of each month, and represents nearly \$100 worth of biological material; however, there seems to be absolutely *no* record of any payment.

Naturally, I do not want to accuse anyone of dishonesty, but if this account is otherwise correct, this is extreme inefficiency, at least. I would like to have the following information by tomorrow morning:

1. The original order or a copy of it, if available.
2. The address of the consignee, and any other information about the firm; the name Sabazius is not in our records.
3. A copy of the shipping order, giving the precise items shipped.

AK

BOOKKEEPER TO SHIPPING ROOM:

Pat: the new boss wants to know about the Sabazius order, and all I could tell him was what old John III told me, 20 years ago. "Don't ask questions; just ship the stuff." I never even asked what was in it. As far as the books are concerned, it's a steady loss item, like alcohol evaporation. Kelman seems to think somebody's stealing in the warehouse, which is typical of the way he looks at things.

Sam Stover

FILE FOLDER, ORDER E-4, SABAZIUS

The enclosed list of material is to be despatched on the first instant of each month until further notice, to the following individual: Doctor Sabazius, Greenlane, Water Road, Mintonville, Maine.

It is to be packed in a strong wooden box, with straw, and marked "Do Not Delay, Perishable." I would suggest the use of the Fall River Steamship Packets. I understand their vessels stop at Mintonville.

This order is to remain standing until further notice, and is to be carried as a gratis order, without charge. It represents the interest on a debt owed to the consignee, and it must not be cancelled.

John Barcroft, President

June 4, 1859

Order E-4, List

1. Vervain, dried; six oz.
2. Amanita Muscaria, dried; 10 oz.
3. Wing, common bat; 4
4. Newts, common, alcohol preservative; 6
5. Gallic acid, pure, powder; 12 oz.
6. Horse blood, whole, no preservative; 24 pints
7. Human blood, whole, no preservative; 12 pints

Note, added March, 1884. If you have any difficulty obtaining Item 7 from our regular supplier, see Doctor Goodwin at Boston General Hospital. On Item 3, the new supplier is in Kentucky, address attached.

Note, added May, 1907. On attached order, Item 6 must be replaced at once; consignee returned same by Express. Please follow the shipping list *exactly*. Cattle blood not satisfactory.

MEMO—FROM ARTHUR KELMAN TO BOOKKEEPER:

This file of the original order is utter nonsense, typical of the way business has been conducted in the past. Order E-4 is cancelled as of this date. It represents a loss of thousands. Take care of it.

AK

MEMO—FROM ARTHUR KELMAN TO PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT:

The following personnel are to be discharged as of today's date.

Samuel Stover, Chief Bookkeeper; Patrick Malloy, Shipping Department.

Reason: gross insubordination and deliberate misappropriation of merchandise. These people were given direct orders to cancel a shipment (E-4, Sabazius) and nevertheless have continued to ship the order each month for the past three months.

These two men are not to be rehired under any circumstances.

AK

MEMO—FROM ARTHUR KELMAN TO LEGAL DEPARTMENT:

Enclosed find a "contract" of some sort, which I received in today's mail. Some of the terms are rather curious. I'd be interested to learn whether anything else like this ever turned up, whether in any of the

old Barcroft records, or more recent files.

The "contract" seems to be in rather bad Greek although I'm far from expert in the classical languages, I have attached what I imagine is a partial translation.

I'm sending this along for your files primarily as a curiosity—but if you think it can be collected, be sure and let me know! Seriously though, for the sake of the firm's reputation, I would prefer that you destroy it or at least keep it under lock and key. I would not like to see some sensationalist get a story like this going, even if the founder of the firm has been dead for 50 years.

As soon as this arrived this morning, I started checking. I called the Chief of Police in this town, Mintonville; it's a place with about 50 or 100 population, I should guess. The Chief claimed there was no such address, and that "Water Street" was the name of a canal of sorts that opened directly into the harbor. Mintonville used to be a fishing village, apparently.

Then I tried the local Express office, since the order referred to had been shipped by that method. The local agent "didn't know," but vaguely remembered that the order was always picked up . . . by "somebody." Signed for, too—per "Sabazius."

Somebody was probably getting something for nothing for quite some time, and apparently decided to have one more try at making a "touch." I can't imagine where the "contract" with the original Barcroft signature came from, though.

I'm going to check with a detective agency about this

AK

MEMO—OFFICE MANAGER TO BUILDING SUPERINTENDENT:

Please try to send more heat up to Mr. Kelman's office. He has been complaining about the chill in the rooms, and I found it quite cold in there myself this morning.

Also, will you check with the night porter about making sure that all the waste baskets are emptied in the Executive Office wing? It was not done over the weekend or last night. And you might also ask the night porter to be a bit more careful. There are dirty footprints all over the rug in Mr. Kelman's office, and a bad odor. Possibly there's a dead mouse or rat somewhere. Would you check up, please?

MEMO—FROM ARTHUR KELMAN TO BUILDING SUPERINTENDENT:

If you can't find who is entering these offices at night and making trouble, I'll have to arrange to hire someone who can. I don't want to hear any more excuses. Not only were the floors dirty and soaked with water again last night, but the portrait of the firm's founder, in my office, was deliberately and disgustingly defaced.

In addition, there is still not enough heat in my office.

AK

### BUSINESSMAN STRICKEN; ASSAILANT FLEES

*. . . was found by a night watchman who had been recently hired, because of repeated damage to the offices by unknown night prowlers. The watchman reported having seen a man apparently about to jump from a fourth floor fire escape. However, when the watchman reached the fourth floor, the prowler was gone.*

*Mr. Kelman was found unconscious at his desk. He had decided to remain at the company offices in order to investigate the recent damage to the rooms. At General Hospital, Mr. Kelman was pronounced dead of heart failure; however, the Police Department has requested an autopsy because of the unusual circumstances surrounding the death.*

*Police and company officials stated that there were no losses of any kind, and that the safes had not been disturbed.*

*. . . and that I, John Barcroft, do therefore agree to fill the conditions of the loan as aforesaid, paying the mage Sabazius in such materials as he may require for his work and for his continued existence in the flesh. And these materials shall be regarded as interest upon the principal of the said loan of magickal aid.*

*Also, that if at any time the payment of interest shall come into default, the whole principal shall be due and collectible, consisting of those elements of the soul and body listed above, and may be taken by the mage Sabazius for his own purposes, from myself, my heirs, assignees, or whomever shall be head of the Barcroft Company.*

*signed, John Barcroft, 1849*

*witnessed, for the Brotherhood:*

*Azrael Sabazius, Doctor Magicae.*

PRINCIPAL COLLECTED AND ACCOUNT CLOSED. SABAZIUS FACILIT. ●



# THE VEILED WOMAN

by Larry Bearson

**S**HE WORE black of course. A bit of flimsy white in her hand. Not a sound came from her, no sobs. She didn't sit but stood motionlessly looking down at old Tom.

I had fought out a private war with myself against coming to this place. Much as I wanted to pay a last visit to old Tom, I knew she'd be there and I never wanted to be anyplace where I'd have to look again at Enid.

In the corners of the room I recognized a few faces. You could hear a hushed whisper now and then but no one spoke much. All of us were looking at her. Yes, I too, now that I had come.

Why the veil, I wondered. She'd never hidden her face before. What did she have to fear? We could never tell from Enid's face what she was thinking, not any of us—Tom's old friends, his sisters, his partners and their wives.

Watching her there in the gloomy funeral parlor, I'm sure I was not the only one to think: "All right, Enid. You're the picture perfect of the tragic widow. Now lift the veil. Show the face, the so much-talked-of face of Enid Pierce."

Two men who looked vaguely familiar came in and advancing toward the coffin, stopped, just as all the rest of us had, at the sight of her. She wasn't letting anyone near him, not even now.

"What the hell am I doing here?" I think I must have said it aloud, because three people across the room turned to me at once. Tom's sister, Phylis, was one. What could she or any of us do for Tom now, when Lord knows we'd tried when there was a live walking Tom Pierce?

It was easy to remember Tom, when he'd been your friend—in spite of the years that had passed. Shifting from foot to foot in that hideous funeral parlor, it was easy to remember too many things.

I spun around and walked out fast. Outside it was still bright daylight. Just the same I looked for a bar, went in at the first one I came to. It was one of those all neon-tube places, gruff bartender, TV set booming. I could smoke here and felt better with the first shot. But not much better. The sight of her back there, guarding Tom in his box, it sticks in your mind. And the whole damned thing starts spinning over and over . . .

Tom and I were sharing a bachelor apartment when he met Enid. Tom Pierce was no boy with women. Who remembers better than I the procession of New York janes dancing through our portal!

In those days Tom, as junior partner in his law firm, would appear dutifully in response to those dinner invitations to the homes of semi-important clients. On one of those occasions Enid turned up as sister-in-law of the host. It certainly would be something to have an eye-witness account of what actually took place that evening. Whatever it was, it meant the end of Tom Pierce as we knew him.

None of his friends could understand Tom's delighted interest in the rather dowdy girl who began showing up with him everywhere. She'd spend the entire evening at his side, as in a trance, coming alive only when he spoke to her.

You'd say: "How are you, Enid?"

"Very well thank you," she'd reply. Then silence. She'd look back to Tom again and the conversation was over.

In a few months they were married. November it was. Tom wanted all of us to be there, the whole crowd. We were. Irene Dennis turned up with a new husband; Isabel Cunningham with the one she was shedding. Sally Potter came, clinging to Dan Harris, expediting his enthusiasm for weddings. She succeeded only too well. Three weeks later he eloped with a chorus girl. Freddie was there and Stan, Monty



just back from Europe and other expert hell-raisers all set for a rip-snorting time.

Well, it wasn't. Big good-natured Tom shook hands and said hello to everybody in a beautiful daze. He got married, that's all. Enid? Let's say she made a radiant bride. Certainly no one was struck dumb with admiration or broke down and blubbered at the sight of her in veil and bouquet.

"She must have money," Isabel Cunningham whispered during the ceremony.

"No, I don't think so," I said.

"She looks like the only daughter of a violently rich meat packer," Isabel announced.

"Fish," hissed Sally Potter.

"Too blank in the face to be pretty," Isabel decided, and as one of the town's leading designers she should know. "Definitely not chic, they never are. She can't be stupid, because she doesn't open her mouth any more than she has to. But just how clever is she?"

"Darling, she listens," put in sly Sally. "You know you can't trust a woman who listens."

While the new Mr. and Mrs. Tom Pierce honeymooned in Mexico, I found another apartment, which I could afford to carry alone. The old place was taken over by three bachelor girls who, I heard, carried on our tradition there riotously.

Four months after Tom and Enid returned, some of us went to call on them. Four months later, mind you. They'd spent the time in retirement "improving their quarters"—one room in an apartment hotel. Isabel Cunningham and new husband had furnished a seven-room house and cellar in half that time.

It was on a Sunday afternoon. "For cocktails," Tom had said.

If there is any doubt to the propaganda that marriage is made for women, one glance at Enid settled the question. She looked very slim, all in black. The change in her appearance made even Sally Potter's wise eyes pop. *You* try explaining what had come over Enid Pierce, we couldn't.

She had sloe green eyes, we discovered, a nose that set the way it should on a face, a new sweep to her hair and a relaxed self-assured way of moving about, that kept you from looking anywhere else.

Was this Enid? Sally Potter sat openly staring—never had she had so little to say! Tom was walking adoration for his bride with no attempt at concealment. What had he done to his Enid? Taken her to some witch doctor in a Mexican village, who'd brought out this

hidden enchantment? Perhaps this was what Tom had seen all along and was now being revealed to us for the first time. Under the spell of that Sunday afternoon I almost proposed to Jeanie Clanton! What a fate! Today Jeanie is enormous and keeps six dogs, all Pomeranians.

More than a year later—oh yes, it was that long before any of us saw them again—the effect Enid made was just as startling. Tom's little mouse was turning into a beauty. But it was in the way she looked that Enid had changed, and that's all.

When she spoke to you, it was always as from a great distance. Her eyes would be turned in your direction but she never seemed to see you. When she smiled, it was always a secret sort of smile to herself.

"How nice to see you again," she said to all of Tom's friends, with exactly the same intonation as, "Now I think I'll eat a fig." And Tom watched her proudly, smiling his ears off, so genuinely pleased to share his joy in her with us. It made you want to like her. You tried. You couldn't. You just couldn't.

"She wants to erase everything that happened in Tom's life before she met him," was Sally Potter's final deduction.

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't care why," Sally snapped. "I've had enough of Tom's dream-girl!" I'll say this for la Potter, in spite of her weakness for theatrical effects, when she walked out of the one-room hotel apartment, it really was for the last time.

Tom and I were like old army buddies. How many real friends do you make in a place like New York City? I had to keep an open mind about Enid.

In a few years Tom was made a senior partner in his law firm. He'd worked hard and deserved it. His winning way with people not only brought him friends but clients. It was good to hear that from his former bosses Al Kendrick and Hank Moore. They said it for all to hear at a party to celebrate Tom's promotion.

Less of the old crowd was on hand this time. Those of us who were there—actually only Stan, Monty, Tom's sister Phyllis and a couple of others besides myself—were tickled pink to see Tom getting places.

He looked tired, noticeably so.

Al Kendrick stood up, only reaching the shoulder of towering Tom. He produced a handsome heavy gold cigarette case. "For you, ya big moose!" Al shouted.

The engraved message inside read: "To our partner and pal—Al and Hank."

Stretching an affectionate paw around Tom's shoulder, Al said: "We want you to take a rest, partner. Pack up and go somewhere for a month. And if you really loaf, moose, you can stay six weeks!"

"Going to need all your pep for that anti-trust case," Hank Moore chimed in, opening up a big box of expensive cigars.

Standing beside Tom, Enid looked like a movie star, ready to slap a ship with a bottle of champagne. How do you describe a woman's clothes, her face, hair, when it's perfection? Enid was more beautiful than before. And the more beautiful she became, the more unreal.

It was hard to believe that that night she'd been carrying Tom's child for several months.

I went to see her at the hospital, when she lost the baby.

"How nice of you to come," she said in the usual Enid way.

"How do you feel," I asked awkwardly. It was always that way when I spoke to her.

"Very well, thank you." She turned to smile at Tom. "It was a bad experience but more for my poor angel than for me. Just look at him."

Good old Tom—it was about that time that he became *old* Tom to us—he looked awful, poor fellow, hovering solicitously over her bed. There were deep circles under his eyes. His hair was thinning rapidly. He wasn't carrying himself well, not in that erect way, which had always marked him as an athlete. When he walked across the room, his step was heavy, his feet seemed to drag. I thought I'd better have a talk with the guy.

"You look cooped up, fella," I said. "How about taking a drive, if you're about to leave?"

He was lighting Enid's cigarette, patting up her pillows, his every gesture showing the pleasure it gave him to serve her.

"Leave Enid?" he said, making it sound as if I'd suggested setting fire to her bed. "I want to stay with my girl as long as I can."

The nurse came in with a tray of food. It made Enid wonder how long it had been since Tom had eaten. Besides, the nurse thought her patient could do with a nap, as soon as she was done with the tray, so reluctantly Tom tore himself away.

In the car he sat back wearily.

"Look," I said, "When's the last time you saw a doctor?"

"Who? Me?"

"For yourself, Tom."

He frowned. "What for?"

"I think you should, that's what for!" I barked.

He turned back for a last look at the disappearing hospital.

"Do I have to hear it from you too, about the way I look?" he said with unmistakable annoyance. "What's the matter with everybody? We've been through a lot, Enid and I."

Maybe so, I thought. You wouldn't know it to look at her. I tried again but it just wasn't himself he'd talk about.

"I used to think I'd never get married," he said. "Remember?"

Maybe he did say it in the old days. Who remembers things like that?

"We're so happy," he went on. "When are you going to do it, you tramp?"

"Get married? Sometime maybe."

"Don't wait. Do something about it," he persisted. "You're cheating yourself of so much. Believe me, I know."

I muttered: "If it's in me to be the kind of husband you are."

There was a pause. He must have caught something in my voice. Then he shot out: "I know lots of people don't like Enid."

"I think she's a fine girl," I put in hastily.

He looked solemn. "Lord knows I'm critical enough of faults in other women. Don't think I'm not aware of Enid's. But when a woman is right for you, you overlook things, you have to. You're glad to." That was the most he said about anything for the rest of the ride.

As time went by, none of the old crowd got to see much of Tom and Enid. On the other hand there was much getting together between all three law partners and their wives—for a while. I spent an evening with this menage of the Kendricks, the Moores and the Pierces.

The place was filled with people who looked as if wearing anything but formal clothes would make them itch. Enid seemed innocently unaware of the recurring attention she drew all evening from the tables around us. Surely she couldn't help hearing some of the comments of the strutting playboys, as they passed our table. Once Moore and Kendrick stopped writing figures on the tablecloth and lifted their heads at the sound of a bold young male voice calling out:

"I wish I had the guts to ask that gorgeous gal for a dance!"

We all looked at Enid.

"Tom dear," she said placidly, "please have the waiter bring me another cup of coffee."

I knew then—and from the furtive glances of the two partners' wives, I saw they knew too—all that Enid really cared about. She could sit with people in a public place for hours, without a word or thought to exchange, completely unconcerned about what was being

said or felt, because all the time she was lost in a game of playing to a vast unseen audience, which grew and grew in her imagination. She was thrilling to murmured compliments, gasps, sighs, to outstretched hands, too far out of reach to touch her. A statue of a goddess, not quite motionless, placed at the peak of Mt. Everest—that was Enid.

What was it like to lie at night beside this woman?

As for Tom, there was one great disappointment for him. He spoke of it once to his sister Phyllis. It was that there could be no more babies. He must have gotten over that, he never mentioned it again.

There had always been friction between Enid and Tom's two sisters. When the last quarrel threatened a permanent breach, Phyllis went alone one afternoon to see Enid. It was Phyllis who, after the death of their parents, willingly made all kinds of sacrifices to support Tom through college. What transpired that day between the two women resulted in the end of all relations for Tom and his family. I would never have believed he'd give up seeing Phyllis!

She telephoned me. Phyl is not a wailing kind of woman. I didn't blame her a bit for letting go over the phone, knowing what her brother meant to her.

Though she didn't actually come out and ask it, I knew at once the real reason for the call. She hoped I'd see Tom and try to poke some sense into his head. She was grateful when I offered to do so.

I chose a Monday to telephone Tom at his office and suggest lunch at a restaurant with high-walled booths, a favorite hangout of ours in the old days.

"Sure!" came Tom's voice. "Where the hell have you been, you bum? What's the idea, not keeping in touch?"

In the past months I'd left at least three messages at his office, which he'd never acknowledged. I let him off with:

"That's right, old boy. It's been a long while."

"How about lunch tomorrow?" he offered. "Twelve-thirty."

After hanging up, I sat looking at the phone. Tom must have lost some of his teeth. What else could make him sound that way?

He showed up for the appointment the next day right on time. With Enid. No one will ever convince me she came along for any reason other than to cut off any discussion about Tom's sisters. One look at the two of them sitting across from me was enough to discourage any mention of Phyllis.

The many times we'd sat in this familiar spot, arguing ball teams, in serious conference on whether a girl merited a play or a move, bor-

rowing from each other to pay for the meal. Stooped old Walter, who's been waiting on us for years, didn't linger leaning on the booth post, eager for talk. He looked at Tom once, took our orders, brought food, hurried away with shuffling walk all oldtime waiters have.

In his early forties at the time, Tom Pierce was an old man. This grey-faced fellow holding Enid's hand looked Walter's age. But it was Tom all right. There was still something of the friendly eyes, the big frame, the Tom grin.

I don't know how I got through the meal, incapable of swallowing a bite of food. *Enid, at the age of forty, looked exactly as she had on returning from their honeymoon*, how many years ago I was much too shocked to think. There they sat, two incongruous people who couldn't possibly have been married to each other all that time!

Between passing her this, asking if she'd like more of that, worshipping the very spoon that was held to her mouth, Tom spoke of his having been ill.

"Weeks ago. High blood pressure," he said, "just a touch. Under control now." He turned to her, as to a pot of milk about to boil, pleading: "Dearest, don't leave the dessert. Take some of it, please, for your energy."

*Her energy?*

"Doesn't my sweetheart look wonderful?" Tom beamed. "She really grows more beautiful."

"Uncanny—the way she does," I agreed.

Enid rewarded me with a dazzling smile, which made me shudder.

That evening I phoned Phyllis to report my failure. She too was quick to draw her conclusions about why Enid appeared for the lunch.

"You are a friend," Phyllis sighed. "Thanks for doing your best. I'm afraid it's no use."

"That's about how I feel, Phyl," I admitted.

Thinking of the way they had looked was enough to make me suspect I had an overcharged imagination. I didn't know of anyone else who'd seen Tom and Enid lately. I had to speak of it.

"Phyl," I started cautiously, "when you saw them last, were they . . . well, did they appear to you . . ."

She almost whispered: "You've seen it too."

"The way Tom looks . . ."

"That's how he's been for sometime," she said. He keeps insisting there's nothing really wrong."

"But there is, Phyl, there is!"

"There must be," she said and she sounded frightened.

"And she, Enid . . ." I began.

There was a pause. I could hear her breathing at the other end of the phone. Finally she spoke in an odd voice: "God help him," she said. Then: "Excuse me. I can't talk any more." She hung up.

After that I couldn't sleep for nights. It couldn't go on. I had to give up butting into Tom's affairs. To hell with friendship, if I was to have any peace of mind.

We exchanged cards at Christmas time, the Pierces and I. Once I sent them an anniversary card and got sore at myself for doing it.

Every now and then I'd meet someone who'd happened to see them somewhere. Always I'd hear about how everyone was thunderstruck at the sight of the breathtaking Enid. But for Tom, "What happened to the poor old guy?" was the unfailing comment. Believe me, I got sick and tired of it.

By this time we were in the war years. If Tom had any problems, they weren't financial. Like many well-known law firms, he and his partners hit it big during the war.

One evening I ran into Al Kendrick. He was alone; his wife had gone west to be with their daughter who was expecting a child, he explained rather carefully. It was at a rave-notice Broadway show, where you fought to pay five times the price of admission and spent three acts wondering why.

All through intermission and afterwards at Sardi's, Al filled my ear with the sorry tale of what a pigeon old Tom had become.

"Too easy with her," Al kept saying. "Okay! To some guys it means a lot to show around a wife like that. Looks too good to be legal!" He gave me a roguish wink, laughed and shoved a cigar in his mouth. "Great!" he went on. "If it makes the moose happy, let him not say no to her. But when she has him take weeks off from the office to stay home and pat her little hand. Or calls him for lunch and keeps him out for the rest of the day, while his clients throw aspirin at each other. Aw for the luvva mike! Has the guy gone crazy?"

"Al," I kept saying, "he hasn't been well." What else could I say?

"Hell! He looks half dead!" Al sputtered through his cigar. "But try and tell him that! Look, if our work is interfering with his wife, let him retire!"

"Retire?" I said defensively. "Tom has too much to give the business."

"That's the trouble," Al grumbled. "People love the guy. The business needs what he's got! He took hold of my shoulder. 'Listen,' he

said abruptly, "I've talked to him. So has Hank. All I can say is somebody else'd better try." Al crushed out his cigar.

No sir, I vowed. I'm not letting myself in for it again.

All the next day I took great pains to keep the telephone out of sight. Probably I would have called in the end. Enid saved me the trouble. There she was on the phone, calmly asking me to dinner—for the first time in ten years!

It was a delicious meal. Enid seemed to enjoy serving it.

"Frozen food, every bit of it, except for the Parker House rolls," she confessed, when I complimented her.

This girl-faced creature moving about with the grace of a dancer—had I really seen her become Tom's wife so long ago? With every spoonful I recounted years and dates. Any way I figured it, she'd have to blow fifty candles on her birthday cake.

I kept trying to catch her in the mirror over the table, as if there her true image would be revealed. Suddenly her eyes in the mirror were looking straight back at me.

"Another lobster-tail?" She smiled, offering the platter. I started to reach for it in the mirror and upset a glass.

Her skin glistened with youthful pinkness. Perhaps surgery accounted for the absence of lines and saggings. But age shows in the eyes, the lips, hands, the voice. Have you noticed how the nose and ears of old people grow larger? *Somewhere* it's got to show!

I've seen some of those actresses who in their sixties play young girls on stage. Come close to one of these tightly held together maidens and you have the uneasy sensation that a sudden jerk will pull everything loose.

Where was the tell-tale sign in this radiantly youthful figure?

It's true that the lights in the apartment were subdued. Not so I couldn't clearly see my old friend Tom. His sunken jaw, trembling fingers, the dry brittleness of his bones were all too apparent. This man and I belonged to the same generation. What lived with these two in this room that could so twist every evidence of time?

Poor old Tom's eyes followed everywhere she went. Never once did he address himself to me, unless I spoke first. How he loved her—still!

He, twenty years older than his age. She twenty younger. Could his love be so great that he could keep her young and grow old for them both?

"There's nothing more we want, dear," he was saying in a husky whisper of a voice that made me squirm. He made a tired gesture. "Please come and sit here." He was struggling to open something. It



was the gold cigarette case his partners had given him so far back.

Enid opened it and held it out to him. "Only one more, darling," she said gently. Then with a look of earnest appeal to me: "Don't you think my Tom should retire, after working so terribly hard all these years?"

What work is there for this man, I thought. Drawing breath seems all he can manage.

"Dearest—please," old Tom whispered.

"After thirty years with the firm," Enid said.

There was nothing casual about this. I began to see what Enid was leading to.

I said: "I'm sure they wouldn't try to keep Tom, if he asked for it."

Enid laughed. "The terms they've offered him! Those shyster partners!" Fine gold bracelets jingled on her smooth arm as she raised it. "They should be very generous with Tom. What would they be without him?"

"Enid, my dear . . ." came the whisper again.

*Now she wanted to bleed them, the partners too!* And this poor wreck of my friend Tom wouldn't give in. He was fighting her for the first time in his miserably ecstatic life with her.

She patted Tom's hand and gave him the kind of smile you give to a child.

"You see," she said, "Tom has a noble sense of loyalty. I'm proud of him and grateful for that. But that mustn't interfere with the price of his worth." The bracelets came to rest on the arm of my chair. I felt a chill. "Don't you think so?" she asked me.

That's why she'd brought me here. To help beat down the first feeble resistance he'd ever shown. The anger and hatred of years for that unchanging face rose up. I wanted to take that face in my hands and squash it!

I looked to the door. If only someone would knock. If I could stand up, go to it, say sorry, charming dinner, goodnight—I must, now, now!

"Tom's always spoken so fondly of you," she said, moving so that she covered the door. "He'll listen to his best friend."

I got out of the chair. "This man is not my friend," I said, my voice trembling. "I don't know this man, even though you call him Tom Pierce." She had to move out of my way, as I made for the door.

"You didn't have to ask me here!" I called back. "You don't need my help to finish him!"

Over my shoulder I saw Tom reaching shakily for another cigarette.

Outside in the hall, I stood quivering for some time, before I could ring for the elevator.

A few months later Tom Pierce sued his partners in court. A settlement was made. How much was paid never came out. Every dollar of it was marked with bitter resentment.

"Freshen up your drink, mister?"

The bartender looked gruffer than before. It was dark outside the neon-trimmed bar windows. How long I must have been dreaming over the second drink!

"No thanks, that'll do." The tip I put down rung up like a cash register on Gruffy's face.

They'd all have left the funeral parlor by now. Out on the street I took the opposite direction.

Two weeks later I was pressing the bell of Enid's apartment. Crazy! The letter in my pocket had brought me. It said:

"Tom left something for you. I agree that you should have it. Please come on Tuesday at five, so I can give it to you."

I could have written asking her to send it, whatever it was. Yet the moment I'd read those words, I'd known I would be there.

A voice called from within: "The door is open. Come in."

At first it was so dark inside, that I stood at the door, trying to guess from where the voice had come.

"Won't you sit down?" I heard her say.

She was in a club chair, her back to the window, from which came the only light in the room.

I groped my way to the armchair beside her.

"Will you have tea with me? A highball if you prefer?" My ears pricked up. Proud distant Enid had never sounded like this before.

"Thank you," I faltered, "I'm afraid—I haven't time."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "I mustn't keep you."

She got up slowly and moved to a desk in the corner of the room. I could hear her open a drawer, begin to rummage.

"It's dark here," her voice came, "I can't seem to . . . Please, would you put on the lamp, it's right by you."

The room lit up vividly. She was at the desk, her back to me.

"I have it. You can put out the light now," she said, starting to turn.

I reached for the switch. I didn't pull it. She kept turning until she faced me, her eyes on my outstretched hand. I still didn't put off the light. I couldn't, because my hand had stiffened.

A shrunken old woman was hoding Tom's gold cigarette case. ●



# THE CAGE

by Bryce Walton

**J**AMES LINDERMAN walked through the October evening with a certain withered elegance that concealed wariness. He hesitated finally among dead leaves, a little man, frayed at the temples, thin, rather yellow and faded. He stared at the house that seemed so quiet and dignified back among the naked trees.

He could feel Madie, feel her waiting behind the door, that ponderous, dull woman who hated him too much to do without him.

He didn't really fear his wife anymore. Years of her special brand of sadism and humiliating treatment had dulled fear. He was wary of himself. Afraid of losing the stoicism that concealed his timidity. He was afraid of the past, those years when he had no defense and had only yelled, stamped his feet, turned red in the face and locked himself in a dark room to stew for hours and hours.

He looked at his watch. After six. He was supposed to have come home, been home all afternoon, taking orders, doing little things about the house. At this moment he was supposed to be walking Joey, the cocker spaniel. He shivered a little and poked unsteady hands into his thin topcoat.

Then the excitement and all the other feelings he had gotten from the zoo came back. He straightened and walked up the brick walk toward the front porch.

Sometimes Mr. Kingery gave him an afternoon off. Linderman's job had never been too important and now was hardly important at all. Instead of coming directly home on these occasions, Linderman went to the zoo ten blocks away. Somehow Madie always found out. She usually called the office, and Mr. Kingery, one of the old moral breed, could not even tell a little white lie. That way, Madie almost always found out directly about Linderman's delinquency. And even if she didn't call, she knew, which made Linderman sometimes imagine that Madie could be psychic, what with her horoscopes, cranium charts and what not.

Fraternizing with the inhabitants of the zoo gave him courage. He had always been fascinated by animals. He only enjoyed Disney Cartoons at the movie houses. He had collections of animal picture books. He had a collection of small plastic animals. His new collection was bigger than the first one which Madie had found hidden in the basement and burned. The new collection he kept hidden in the garage.

He sometimes remembered that it had been that way since he was a kid, when everybody was concerned with animals. He saw people as animals sometimes. Mr. Kingery as a possum. Madie as a sow. Derby, the druggist, as a rat.

But the real ones at the zoo were an indescribable experience for Linderman. Especially the lions, tigers, panthers and the gorilla. He loved the zoo. The keepers there knew Linderman, granted him special privileges such as allowing him to accompany them during feedings. Linderman knew the grounds better than his own neighborhood. He didn't love animals. He felt an intense affection for some of them. Some he hated with a kind of fearsome thrill in his bones. Others he found fascinatingly repellent.

Years ago he had kept a lot of live pets. But after meeting Madie at a get-acquainted dance and marrying her a week later and moving into her house, he had been forced to get rid of all of them. Now the sole pet around the house, Madie's cocker spaniel Joey, was one of the animals Linderman not only hated but loathed. When he thought of Joey it reminded him of a large painting of a dead dog at the Museum of Modern

Art. He went there quite often on his lunch hour to look at Rousseau's paintings. Especially that one of the golden lion under the moon.

He dreamed of animals all the time. Sometimes he dreamed he was the man in Rousseau's painting lying on the sand and he would look up in his sleep and see that strange luminescent beast hovering over him.

He wiped his small shoes carefully on the mat, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

The smell of grease permeated the hallway that stretched back dimly through flowered walls and old-fashioned green velvet drapes with dead tassels hanging on them.

Madie looked at him bleakly. Her chestnut-colored eyes were dull with disdain. Not fresh chestnuts, but dried-out ones. The rest of her fat face looked gray, like the light filtering through the door pane. Linderman made ineffectual motions to unbutton his coat.

She made one of her customary curious noises, a snort with a touch of snarl in it. "Just leave your coat on."

She pulled her housecoat snugly around her fat.

Linderman looked down as Joey poked his face out from beneath the housecoat. It let out a short sadistic little yapping sound directed at Linderman. Its brown eyes jutted up at him like fat wet marbles.

Joey sensed Linderman's hatred and enjoyed his immunity. He seemed to take malignant pleasure in his protected status.

Madie put the chain in Linderman's wet hand. "Take Joey out and hurry back," she said in that dreadful voice that sometimes had the brittleness of dry suet, and at other times a doughy softness "Joey's so nervous and irritated from waiting, waiting."

Linderman held onto the dog's chain. Joey waddled out, his protuberant wet eyes brightening with anticipation.

"You're not getting any dinner tonight, you're too late," Madie said. "Now hurry back. I'm going to tell you something you've been asking for a long time."

"What?" Linderman asked. He looked past Madie's face at the wall.

"Take Joey out."

"All right, Madie."

"You've been to the zoo again. I told you I wouldn't stand for any more of your filthy habits."

"I had to—"

"No excuse please. I know you've been to the zoo. I warned you."

"I wasn't trying to—"

"I've already made the necessary arrangements."

"Arrangements?"

"I'm getting a divorce." She opened the door. Joey sniffed languidly, yawned, then darted out through the opening and almost jerked Linderman off his feet. "I warned you. I've already talked with my attorney."

She looked at him with those dull dried-out eyes. Now her voice was dreadful, she almost bugled. "Then we'll see how you like it. You're a pauper, you know that don't you? A pauper. You won't even have a job in another month. I know about that. I own this house, and everything in it. You don't have anything. You're a sick old pauper!"

Linderman was dragged out of the house and along the walk through the dry leaves. The grayness had turned to deep charcoal lying over everything as he felt himself being towed along dully in a state of numbed incomprehension.

Madie had threatened to divorce him for years. But this time he knew that she meant it. Madie had money when he married her. It was her house, her furniture, everything was hers, as she had just pointed out and as she had pointed out almost daily for years. He had never made any money other than a meager salary, and Madie had kept her savings intact and they had taken all expenses out of his salary. He had saved nothing, owned nothing. He had kept his job only because of old man Kingery, but the old man was about to retire with a bad heart and his son was taking over. Linderman would be out in another month. His sort of clerical work was better done for the young by young women secretaries, and anyway the entire company was going to get a thorough overhaul. The most Linderman could look forward to was a job at about forty a week filing papers.

The thing that had been crouching inside Linderman for too long suddenly came out in a wash of empty terror. The chill night wind whispered through his topcoat and seemed to blow between his bones. He did not look forward to a job filing papers. The fact was that he had never, in all of his life, ever looked forward to much of anything.

Joey was carrying out his usual routine of torture, lingering first at this tree then at another looking up and grinning at Linderman out of bulging wet eyes. He gave out with little joyful yaps, then went sniffing

about, pulling Linderman this way and that, purposelessly, like an empty rowboat. The dog would run around a small tree deliberately wrapping up the chain. When Linderman freed the chain, it would run around the other way entangling the chain again.

Linderman was shivering as he gave the chain a vicious yank. Shocked at this thoroughly unexpected treatment, Joey lay on his belly and made an artful little whimper, then crept along with his body close to the ground.

Intoxicated by his own flare of rage that burned even higher at the sight of Joey fawning on his belly, Linderman jerked the chain again. The silky object yelped and sailed past him, then jerked around in the air as it struck the end of the chain.

Linderman laughed out loud, off key. Not a natural nor a very nice laugh, and he knew it.

He kicked Joey in the ribs so hard the dog flew again to the end of its chain. He slunk back along the ground, scuttling among the leaves, realizing the game was no longer the same. The dog then, incredibly, charged in low, soundlessly, his small feet like feathers in the dried grass. The small bright teeth tore expertly at Linderman's trouser cuff.

Linderman started to run instinctively, feeling the same kind of nameless and unreasonable terror he felt in dreams about animals, and which he felt in a different way at the zoo. Joey ran between his legs. He tripped over the chain and fell on his knees.

Crouching there he was looking directly into Joey's wet popping eyes.

"You can't make a damn beast out of me!" Linderman whispered. He was thinking of Madie. He jerked the chain toward him with his left hand and dug his fingers into Joey's neck. He squeezed Joey's writhing neck until it stopped squirming. Joey was still breathing though as Linderman carried him back, and along the side of the house. He knelt down where the basement window looked out parallel to the ground, and almost obscured with coal dust. He wrapped the chain around the cocker's mouth, head, then around its chest and legs and snapped it tight so Joey couldn't call out.

Then he kicked him through the window and down into the coal bin.

He dusted his hands, wiped them on his handkerchief and moved in an oddly detached and numbed way around and up onto the porch. He stood listening, watching the leaves drifting without a sound down

across the dark, then glistening suddenly as they sailed into the moonlight. The moon had a cold merciless look, like a picture above the black silhouette of houses and TV antennae and the black branches of leafless trees.

He imagined the house empty, deserted, dark. No one in it anymore except himself, just Linderman sitting in it at nights.

He opened the door, went down the hall, stepped into the suffocatingly hot living room filled with heavy overstuffed furniture, rugs, drapes, bric-a-brac, old thickly framed pictures of cows by lifeless lakes, and fields of dead flowers, dead ducks hanging on a pole, and the nauseating odor of Joey, the sickish stench of unwashed Joey and hair and dried saliva.

Under the spangled beaded lampshade, Madie shifted her legs. The housecoat was open most of the way and he looked with further nausea at the swell of her breasts and the flab of her thighs and then at the bleak gray face.

His voice came out with unexpected loudness. "I walked Joey."

"Well, where is he?" Joey usually came in and with joyful triumph leaped onto her lap and licked at her face.

"Joey's gone."

It seemed to be a number of minutes that went by. There was only the sound of a large woman breathing. Then he thought he could hear quaint noises, the kind that came out of her when she started getting really mad, a kind of rustling and squeaking inside her.

She got up, very quickly for her and stood a moment, swaying. Her voice was the cold bleat of a foghorn on a frozen river. "Gone?"

"Joey's gone," Linderman repeated.

"He wouldn't run away. Where's Joey?"

"I told you. Gone."

"Go get Joey. Go out and get Joey."

"I choked him," Linderman said.

She made an even more curious noise and sat down very slowly and heavily. Then he saw her come up again quickly and heard her rustling about the room. When he turned, he saw her moving toward him with the poker from the fireplace in which there had never been a fire. Such things had happened before, between longer episodes of a more subtle kind of treatment. He knew that anyone seeing it would consider it



comical. He had seen it in movies but had never laughed. It was not funny when you were one of the participants.

He did as he had always done on such occasions. He ran down the hall, through the kitchen, and down the stairs into the basement.

He hadn't turned on the lights, but he knew his way around in the absolute blackness of the basement. He knew his way around there with the expert knowledge of a rat or a beetle. He knew the damp dusty darkness under the floorboards better than he knew his own room upstairs.

He found Joey twisting about in the coal bin. He grabbed the dog, unwound the chain from his face and carried him kicking over the work bench where he felt around and then picked up a sharp wood-chisel.

The door opened at the head of the stairs and a column of dusty light filtered down. Suddenly the light went on as she worked the switch up there.

"James."

"I've got Joey down here," he said.

She had started down the stairs hesitantly. He saw her thick thigh freeze and the housecoat shivering around it.

"Joey isn't dead yet," Linderman said. He ran over to the foot of the stairs and held Joey up by the scuff of the neck. Joey squirmed and whimpered.

"Look," Linderman said. "Look here, Madie. Look at little Joey."

He walked on over until he was framed in the square of dusty light. He held Joey up in his left hand and held his right hand up with the wood-chisel in it.

"James."

"Look, Madie," he said again. He swung around and kept jamming the chisel in and he started laughing. When Madie let out that grisly solitary scream and lunged at him down the stairs, he reached for the other switch at the foot of the railing and turned off the light. He heard her lose her footing in the abrupt darkness and come rolling, crashing, and thudding musically down the stairs and over the floor.

He found her in the dark and used the wood-chisel and kept on using it until he was too tired to continue. After that he lay on the floor unable even to get to his hands and knees.

He lay there a long time staring up at the darkness where all the pipes were, the gas, and water pipes, and pipes concealing electric wir-

lug, and the pipes from the furnace. He couldn't see anything up there but he knew exactly where they joined, turned, crossed and disappeared into walls and ceiling. He had lain down here on old newspapers looking up there until they were etched in his brain. He had lain down here when he ran away from Madie, and at other times when he came down pretending to be working. Madie had never, under any circumstances, come down into the basement. She was afraid of basements, cellars, anything underground.

Well she was down here now, she and Joey, down here to stay, which meant that he ought to be upstairs.

He seemed to drift up the stairs without effort, and he sat in the kitchen for a while drinking five cans of lager. He noticed that he was getting handprints of coal dust all over everything, and when he walked down the hall toward the front door he saw his long gray face in the hall mirror, covered with coal dust.

"Go for a little walk now," he whispered to himself. "You and me. That's about all there ever was, anyway."

He walked a while. Then he started running. He didn't remember when he started running. There was an odd murky kind of water that seemed to be whirling around inside his head like someone stirring a muddy cup of coffee.

He was rather agile when he wanted to be. In the interests of agility he was willing even to be undignified, and he ran faster and when he reached the edge of the park he went over the wall and kept on running through the black bones of wintry trees, down the hill, past the grape arbor that was full of leafy secrecy in the summertime, and across the bridge made to resemble something from Japan.

He climbed the wire fence. He fell down the other side, and continued running. Once he fell down and lay there under the cold round moon that shone down through the naked still trees on him as he stared up at the sky.

Why, he thought vaguely, this is one of my animal dreams.

It was different than the others but that was what it was because it wasn't real enough to be real. But in a way it seemed more real than any of the other animal dreams. Just like one of those Rousseau dreams when he was lying on some eery desert landscape and shining lions, and glistening tigers or luminescent panthers were standing around him,

or hovering over him, always still, and always waiting in some horribly exciting way.

And now that he remembered it, all of them looking at him with chestnut eyes.

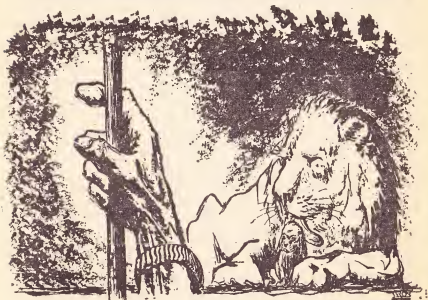
He stopped running when he got up. He walked now with caution because it was a dream and he wasn't too sure of himself in this one. He climbed a concrete wall, lifted himself up over the steel bars, hooked his fingers in the squares of heavy gauge wire. He smelled the familiar musky odor.

He saw the luminescent eyes under him, the tawny golden hide, the slapping softness of padding feet.

The roar and the hot breath burst in his face.

When they found him, he resembled a torn raggedy-Ann doll lying on top of the bars across the top of the lions' den. His arms and legs had dropped through the bars. One of his arms was torn off. And the flesh was gone from his legs.

On the floor of the cage they found his wallet and a wood-chisel. ●



# END ENCE FAIR FAIR WITH THE NIGHT

by Donald Honig

**T**HROUGH the window he could see the corner streetlight shining through the branches of the tree. The house behind it was dark. All the houses on the block were dark, he knew. The whole neighborhood, all of Capstone, from the boulevard to the creek, was dark and sleeping and quiet.

He looked at his wristwatch. Squinting, he could see two o'clock. Then he looked at Bessie. She was in the other bed, sleeping peacefully, unsuspecting. In five hours her eyes would open and she would get out of bed and kiss him and say good morning, then throw her robe over her bone-thin body and go prepare his breakfast.

This was their two years of married life—sleep and routine, peaceful and unbreakable. And already he was tired of it, bitterly tired of the routine, of Bessie's simpering sweetness and attention, of his job and his friends and even of Capstone itself where he had grown up and lived all of his 22 years; where he had met Bessie in public school and dated her in high school and gone out with her every Saturday night he could remember, and eventually married her. He had never even kissed another girl. Until recently.

Stealthily, as if uncovering a corpse, he lifted back the light summer cover and let it drop away from him on the bed. He swung his legs off the bed, rising as his feet touched the cool linoleum. He dressed, with amazing stillness. Then, fully dressed, his shoes on, he looked around at her. She was still sleeping, undisturbed, unsuspecting; the rhythm of her breathing had not varied in the least. As he stood there in the dark he began to feel the heat of anger: *I don't care if she wakes up*, he thought. *I don't care. If she wakes up I'll tell her. I'll tell her right now.*

But she did not wake up.

He slipped out of the bedroom, then out through the kitchen door. He went down the stairs and out the front door to the street. He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past two. He was ten minutes late. But Helen would be waiting. She had waited even longer than that, two nights ago.

He hurried through the shadows, around the corner, into the small dark street behind the school where she always parked. Turning the corner, he saw the car there, parked in the middle of the block, away from the streetlight. It gave him now, as it always did, a hot, jolting feeling. He looked around nervously, then hurried towards the car.

Helen was sitting behind the wheel, one elbow resting on the door. She was smoking a cigarette, her head tipped back, her long blonde pony-tail hanging back over the top of the seat.

"Helen," he whispered, peering through the window.

Before looking at him, she took another deep drag on the cigarette and dropped it into the street, exhaling slowly. Then she looked at him, smiling the bright, stiff smile which remained fixed for a moment.

"Well, Bruce," she said. "Open the door and come in."

"Sure," Bruce said. "I just didn't want to startle you."

He shut the door and moved close to her on the seat.

"You must have the quiet of a rabbit, the way you can sneak out on her every night without waking her," Helen said, the smile still fixed.

"I've had lots of practice now," he said, sliding closer to her, putting his arms around her. She let him kiss her, a feverish, clumsy kiss. His face came away from hers hot and flushed.

"I love to kiss you," he said, a tremble in his voice.

"I thought you'd be tired of that by now."

"I'll never be tired of that."

"You got tired of your wife."

"Never mind her. She was never the woman you are. You know that yourself. You see the chances I take, just to be with you."

"You know," she said, "I'm not the only one taking a risk here. If Bessie ever. . . ."

He covered her lips with his finger. "Don't mention her name," he said angrily. "Why do you have to mention her name?"

Helen shrugged. She twisted away from him, settling herself behind the wheel, pouting. He looked at her, his eyes roving with an odd, fevered hunger over her tautly sweated breasts, down to her round, solid thighs.

"Sure," she said. "For you it's easy. For you it's simple. You can leave me anytime you want and go back to your wife. You've always got a wife waiting there for you. You can use me to your satisfaction, then drop me anytime you feel like."

"No, that's not true." His voice, in whisper, was filled with protest. "Listen, Helen. That's what I want to talk to you about. I don't want her any more. I'm going to leave her. I'm leaving her. I want to go away with you. You and I, and the hell with everything else."

Her profile remained stonily fixed, unconvinced, or unimpressed.

"I'm serious," he said in a low, nagging voice.

"Oh, sure," she said cynically.

"I am. If you don't believe me . . . let's go away now. Right now. Let's just start up the car and take off."

"And go where? Just keep driving until we run out of gas, then look for money to fill the tank up again? Look, Bruce," she said, facing him, "even if we did go away together, what would it mean? It wouldn't mean a thing. You'd still be married to her. You'd still be thinking of her. The time would come when you'd suddenly take off on me and go back to her. Then where would I be?"

"I'd never do that. Once we were away together, far away, I'd start a new life with you."

"What about Bessie?"

"She would be over with as far as I'm concerned. I can't take her anymore. It was a mistake to have married her in the first place."

"Why don't you get a divorce?"

"She won't let me have one. You ought to know that."

"Then what will you do? Be my common-law husband?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'd. . . ."

"You'd still be married to her. And she'd be damn fool enough to wait for you to come back, and you'd know that she was waiting, and I'd never be able to trust you. . . ."

"That would never happen."

"What will you do about her?"

"Do about her?" He looked blankly at her.

"Yes, yes," she pressed. "If you love me so much. If you care that much about me."

For a long while he was silent. Perhaps five minutes. But all that time he was staring steadily at her. Not once did his eyes blink. He merely stared, calm, constant, not thoughtful, not as if he had decided something, but more as if he had brought the decision into the car with him and was waiting for her to react to it, to comment.

"I'll do anything to have you, Helen," he said at last, quietly, his voice without inflection, meaningful, desperate.

"What?" she asked skeptically.

"I'll kill her."

"You'll *what*?"

"Kill her."

"Come off it, Bruce. I've known you for years. I've seen you in school, on the street, in church, in the bars. I know you. I know what you can and can't do."

"I said I would kill her," he said, his voice still the same—quiet, meaningful, his eyes still staring at her blankly.

"How?"

"With my hands. With a rope. A knife. What does it matter how?"

"You would really do that?"

"That's the only way she would be out of the way. It would be final, permanent."

"How about the consequences? How about the police?"

"Stop worrying, Helen. It doesn't become you." His tone, his whole attitude was different now, had altered noticeably since he had spoken his intention.

"All right," she said, shrugging.

"Then we could go away."

"I would imagine so."

"Now, kiss me. Good and hard," he said, sitting there, waiting for her to move toward him.

"He said he'd kill her?" Mike said.

"That's what he said," Helen said. She was lying on the bed, smoking, blowing the smoke toward the clock that ticked steadily on the bureau. It was three-thirty. Mrs. Van Dyke's boarding house was very still. They were speaking in whispers.

"He might at that," Mike said, rubbing his lips together thoughtfully.

"Are you crazy? He might kill a fly, or step on a bug—but then only after deep consideration."

Mike yawned. He was standing by the door, his arms folded. He had thrown his trousers on when he'd heard her unlocking her door, and had come in from his own room across the hall. His bare chest was covered with thick, curly black hair.

"Suppose he does it?" he said.

"Stop talking like a fool. Anyhow I'm thinking of dumping him. He's getting to be a nuisance with all this talk of running away. And now murder. I think some of his marbles are beginning to rattle."

"You *think* so? He's been like that since he was a kid. In fact he was sent away once when he was a kid. He's *not* totally sane."

"I know that."

"So why do you keep seeing him?"

"Why not? With you on the road so much with your damned truck, I need somebody. I thought there wouldn't be any trouble with him. But, God, he's worse than any of the others."

"Serves you right."

"It's interesting, though. It's something different." She yawned, stretching her arms. "But I think I'm going to have to tie the can to him."

"When are you supposed to see him again?"

"We didn't make a definite date. He said, well, he said . . ."

"Said what?"

She shrugged, as if it were foolish. "He said he might even do it tonight and come by for me."



"Listen, suppose he does?"

"Does what?"

"Kill her."

"There you go again," she said, yawning again.

"I wouldn't put it past him."

"Look, Michael. It's almost four o'clock and I'm sleepy. You might be able to sleep tomorrow but I've got to get up."

"Shall I lock the door from the inside?" Mike asked.

"You'd better not," she said. "I've had enough of men for tonight."

"You might be looking for me later, if Bruce comes around here with bloody hands looking to run off with you."

"I'm not worrying, so don't you. Let Bessie worry."

But Bessie was not worrying. She was still sleeping, peacefully and unsuspecting, her face down on the pillow, resting on her hand, her breathing making soft little noises in the dark room.

Bruce was crouched there, kneeling before the bed, staring at her, staring straight into her sleeping face. The light from across the street was touching his face softly, adding tiny pinpoints of light to his calm, staring, meditative eyes. The serenity of her sleep seemed to be mocking him, defying him; she appeared indifferent to what he was planning, as if he would not be able to do it.

I have two hundred dollars, he thought. That, and then I will have Helen and her car and freedom and all the world to go to.

It was a faultless little dream, obstructed only by the tiny sounds of Bessie's breathing. But that seemed so simple to stop. It seemed he could achieve it merely by pressing her nostrils shut with his fingers.

He rose then, rising tall into the dark. He turned and lifted his own pillow from the other bed. With his back to her he stood and held the pillow lightly in his hands, studying it, its softness light in his hands. Then he whirled with it and flung it down on her face: but her face wasn't there. She had turned in her sleep and with all his might and force and desperation he had driven down on an empty spot.

Her bed shook sharply with the impact. She seemed to have been hurled up by the force of it, the covers falling off her, her blank, sleep-fogged face startled, not afraid yet. Then she began to scream, but he

stopped that with his voice. She spoke his name, asked it, in fear and terrified amazement, disbelief. Then he threw her down and pounced on the bed, driving the pillow down over her face, pressing the pillow down with all his strength. She kicked and squirmed, her legs running and thrashing desperately under the covers.

He did not relent. He pressed tightly, the pillow beginning to curve over her face. He gasped, then held his breath. Then he realized that her struggling had ceased, that she had been lying quietly for a long time. He relaxed his pressure. But he did not lift the pillow. He was afraid. He let it rest softly on her face. *I don't have to look at her*, he thought, *There's no reason for me to have to look at her face. Dead is dead.*

He listened carefully. The haunting, maddening little breathing sounds had stopped. She lay beautifully still, only not sleeping now; lying still in a way she never had before. He lifted his hands from the pillow and drew back from the bed. His hand ran across his brow. He was perspiring freely. He stood at the other side of the room, looking at the motionless thing that lay beneath the savagely kicked and twisted covers, at the pillow balanced over the face like a soft white stone. He had done the right thing, he was convinced. It had been the only thing. It would have done no good to have tried to reason with her, or explain.

He looked around the room, thinking of what he should take along with him, besides the money. But there was nothing he really wanted, only to get away, as quickly as possible.

He left the apartment, running with silent quickness down the stairs and outside. He hurried down the block, crossed the avenue and went into the side street where the boarding house was. Entering the house, he went down the first floor hallway, where he knew her room was. He stood before the door for a moment, trying to compose his breathing, as he had been panting. Then he tapped on the door and whispered her name. No answer. He tapped harder, raised his voice.

"Helen. Helen."

Still there was no response. She must be sleeping, he reasoned. There was a noise behind him. He could see Mike standing in the doorway, staring at him curiously.

"What are you doing there, Brucie?" Mike asked.

"None of your business," Bruce said.

"Well I'm going to make it my business."

Bruce turned from him and struck the door solidly.

"Helen!" he cried, his voice suddenly loud, threatening hysteria.

"Knock it off," Mike said.

Bruce raised his fist to strike the door again. Mike came forward and grabbed him by the shoulder and swung him around. Mike squared to throw a punch but Bruce didn't give him the chance, diving into him, grabbing him around the waist and driving him back through the open door. They sprawled over the floor in Mike's room, wrestling for a moment, turning over and over. Then Mike—much the stronger, but contending with a man filled with a surging infuriated strength—managed to get to his feet. He hit Bruce flush on the mouth as the latter was rising, a blow ordinarily hard enough to knock out or at least stun a man, but Bruce took the blow and kept rising.

Bruce lowered his head and bulled into Mike again. They flew together, Mike, feeling a terrific thudding in his mid-section as the breath sailed out of him, fell back under Bruce's furious drive. A chair bounced to the floor. A table spun and tilted and crashed, its radio and lamp tumbling to the floor. Bruce drove Mike back to the wall. Then Mike began to collapse. Bruce swung at him wildly. The punches sounded like pistol shots, whipping Mike's head from side to side.

Mike slid down the wall. Blood trickled in a dark thread from the corner of his mouth. He sat there against the wall, his legs stretched out, his mouth, open like a fish, gulping for air.

Bruce headed for the other door now. He began striking it hard, his fist booming. Receiving no response, he stepped back and began hurling himself against the door, time after time, his body thudding into it until it began to yield, to grunt and to split. The upper panels finally smashed through. He reached inside and slid aside the latch and threw the door open.

"What the hell's going on down here?" demanded a woman's voice. Mrs. Van Dyke came running down the hall, huge and lumpy in a fluttering nightgown, aiming a flashlight.

Bruce, oblivious, stormed into the room, scratching the wall in search of the lightswitch. Finding it, he flipped it on, exposing an empty room. The bedcovers lay thrown back, as if the bed had been hastily vacated.

Mrs. Van Dyke came boiling into the room.

"What do you want?" she cried.

"Where is she?" Bruce demanded, swinging around on her, panting.

"Look for yourself," the landlady said, pointing.

He looked. The window was open. The white curtain fluttered lazily in the breeze. He rushed to the window and peered out. Then he stepped back and swung his legs over the sill and dropped down into the yard.

"Helen!" he screamed into the dark unanswering night. He ran through the garden, trampling the flowers. Her car was parked at the curb; in her panic she had not even taken it.

"Hey, you!" It was the landlady.

He glared back at her for a moment, then whirled and began to run. He disappeared into the night.

She had one good friend that he knew. That was where she must have gone. Where else could she go at this hour?

She thinks she's going to run out on me now, he was thinking. Well she's wrong. She's got another thought coming. But maybe she didn't want to run out. Maybe the noise frightened her. Maybe she didn't know who was knocking. She wouldn't want to run out on me. Especially not now, now that everything is all right, now that Bessie is. . . .

He stopped, pulling up short. He saw Rita's house. It was a one-family brick house. An empty lot was next to it. He crossed the street under the streetlight, his shadow slanting out away from him, riding over the ground with him. Then he entered the dark again.

She must be here, he thought. There's no other place for her to be. She must be in there with Rita, waiting for me to come for her. She must be in there with Rita, waiting for me to come for her. She came to say goodbye to Rita. She knew I'd come here to look for her.

The house was dark. He stole through the lot, pushing through the weeds, opening a path for himself with his hand. He went across the pebbles in the driveway. He knew which was Rita's window. He crept up to it. By standing on the ledge of the cellar window below, and bracing himself with his fingers on the ledge of her window, he could peer into the room.

The room was dark. The window was open on bottom. He squinted

into the dark room, listening, his tongue wiping nervously back and forth across his underlip, his eyes shining, crafty. He could hear nothing. He could see the bed.

"Helen," he whispered.

He turned his head and listened, as if his whisper would enter the room and explore it and return to him with a report. He detected the sounds of breathing.

"Helen," he said again, louder. "Helen. Helen."

Suddenly he stopped, biting down on his lip. Someone was stirring in the bed. He watched the dark form turn languorously, pulling the covers.

"Helen?" he asked, his voice in the tone of normal conversation asking a question.

The form suddenly shot bolt upright in the bed.

"Who's there?" it demanded, its voice startled, frightened.

"Rita?"

"Who's there? Who's there?" The voice was getting louder, beginning to shake with terror, about to go asunder.

"Is Helen there?"

Then the voice began to scream. One loud scream after another, ripping apart the dark, filling the room, coming out through the screen. He stood there, his numbed fingertips gripping the window ledge, his eyes widening, fascinated.

"Stop it!" he cried as the screaming began to unnerve him.

Rita seemed to hurl about in the bed. There was a great soft flying of white covers. Then something struck the screen. He jumped down. He heard an alarm clock—she had thrown that—suddenly begin to bray and rattle from the floor. The room began to fill with voices.

"What's the matter?"

"There's someone out there!"

"Where? Who?"

He fell back from the window, watching the blind snap up and a huge masculine figure appear there. The screen tumbled out and struck the ground at Bruce's feet. He drew back still further.

"Is Helen there?" he demanded, his voice loud, exasperated.

"Get the hell away from here!"

"I want to know if Helen is. . . ." Then something, thrown from

another window, struck him in the side of the head and shattered on the ground. He fell back, his hand holding the side of his head.

"God damn you!" he screamed.

The house was teeming with voices. Lights were flashing on in every room, making the house begin to bulge around him. He shrank back, still holding his head, his eyes glowing with a wild light. Then he turned and fled through the lot, stumbling through the weeds.

When he had run a few blocks he sat down on a curb. The pain in his head was intense. He tried to think, but the thoughts seemed to back up in some dark, sluggish canal, unable to get through.

"Where is she? Where is she?" he muttered.

"I don't know," Mike said. He finished tying his shoe laces and straightened up. He stood up, buttoning his shirt, then stuffed it into his trousers, closed his trousers and buckled his belt. "I don't know where she could have gone. But I've got to find her before that mad-man does."

"What's it all about?" Mrs. Van Dyke asked. The other boarders, a few old men in bathrobes, stood behind her, watching timidly.

"It's too much to explain right now," Mike said. He pushed through the old men who didn't get out of the way fast enough for him.

Mrs. Van Dyke followed him into the hall.

"She couldn't have gone far," the landlady said. "Her car is still out there."

"She forgot to take the keys," Mike said. "They're still in her room. She ducked out so fast she damned forgot them. That's what makes it bad."

"Oughtn't we call the police?"

"You can do what you want," Mike said. He left through the front door.

"This is the last time," Mrs. Van Dyke said aloud to no one in particular, "that I'm taking young ladies in as boarders."

Bruce walked unsteadily. The pain was throbbing inside of his head. The streets were still dark, empty. Then, looking up, he saw an old man walking past him, giving him wide berth, walking warily. He

stared puzzledly at the old man.

"We're going away," he said to the old man who gazed back at him with wide, old, frightened eyes. "We were supposed to go away tonight. But I don't know where she is. Have you seen her?"

The old man kept walking, his head turned around to watch the youth. Bruce watched him fade into the night. Then he walked again, lifting his hand to and from the sharp pain in his head. The pain suddenly became so intense that it caused him to lurch. He banged into the window of a butcher shop, his dark reflection vibrating in the glass.

Then he saw the policeman across the street, standing in the jewelry store's doorway watching him. The sight of the policeman filled Bruce with a strange, dark cunning, the kind of whispering hallucination the commission of a crime will invoke in a man. He began to pull back, taking short, wary steps.

The policeman began to cross the street toward him. Bruce turned and began to run. He heard the policeman shout at him. He could hear the policeman's footsteps rapping swift and rhythmic on the pavement coming after him. Bruce swung around the corner and dashed up the side street, the wind tearing through his long reddish hair, his face gleaming with excitement, his curled lips uncovering sneering teeth.

The strange foottrace continued up the side street, filling the quiet air with running feet. Bruce ducked into an alleyway, running between two houses. He came to a backyard, his foot making contact with something in the dark. A garbage pail went flying, landing with a great noisy clatter, rolling crankily around the yard. He spun around until he saw the high wooden fence. He ran and leaped toward it, grabbing the top and hurling himself over the rickety fence. He landed on his feet and tore through another alleyway.

He had lost the policeman. He stumbled into an empty lot and collapsed there, breathing hard.

They were going to go away. The two of them. Going to go away. She was waiting for him somewhere. If only he knew where. Maybe he ought to go home. Go home and think it over. Home was the only peaceful place, where people did not throw things at him, or shout at him, or chase him through dark streets.

He sat in the empty lot, gradually restoring himself. The pain in his head was dull and steady, throbbing.

After a while he stood up. The inside of his head felt black now. All light and motion seemed to have gone out of it, or died in it. He was walking towards his house dreamily, unthinking. He came to his block and walked down it.

It was beginning to get light now. The first streaks of light were breaking in the east. Soon the town would begin to stir, soon the night would end. *Everything will be all right in the sun*, he thought, the single thought coming through, then his mind slipping back to its darkness.

He mounted the outside steps and went through the door, his face blank, static, his eyes staring straight ahead like death.

He went softly up the stairs. His door was open. He went inside. Night still lingered in the rooms. He went into the bedroom. Then he stopped still, stunned.

Bessie was still lying there, as he had left her, the pillow hiding her face, one arm flung out over the edge of the bed, the covers twisted. But standing over the far side of the bed was Helen. She was staring at him, her face filled with amazement, with horror. He stared back at her; for the moment he was still incapable of speech.

"I had to come here," Helen said in a low, halting voice. "I had to see if you really did it, if you could really have done such a thing. I kept telling myself no, no, that he had not done it. Then when you came to my door, pounding, yelling like that. . . . I thought, God, maybe he did. So I came here."

"Why did you run away?" he asked, his voice like a child's, filled with innocence, with naive hurt at some betrayal.

"Why did you kill her, Bruce? Didn't you know. . . . that I was joking with you in the car? I never thought you'd take it all seriously."

"I knew you'd be waiting," he said. "That's why I came here. I had a little trouble, but I'm here. Now we can leave. It's all right now. I explained it to Bessie. She understood. Now we can leave."

With growing horror Helen watched him. He seemed totally oblivious of what lay between them on the bed.

"Bruce," she said. "What's the matter with you?"

"I want to leave now."

"Leave? Where? Have you gone out of your mind?"

His eyes blinked; it was the first time they had blinked since he



entered the room. They appeared to be sharpening Helen into focus.

"Why did you run away?" he asked.

"What's happened to you?" she said.

"We're leaving now, Helen."

"You've killed her, Bruce. Don't you know what you've done?"

He began to move around the bed toward her, his eyes upon her in a dead, heavy stare.

"You shouldn't have run away," he said, his voice still like a child's explaining some great wrong.

"I saw him," the policeman said. "I chased him a couple of blocks. Then I lost him."

"You haven't seen the girl at all?" Mike asked.

"No."

They were standing on the corner, next to the five and dime. It was light now. People were appearing on the streets, going to work, or to the bakery for rolls.

"I think he might have killed his wife," Mike said. "I think he's gone off his mind."

"Killed his wife? Where does he live? Do you know where he lives?"

"On this block someplace. I don't know. All the houses here look alike."

They turned and looked up the street. They saw him then, walking slowly toward them, very slowly. He was carrying someone in his arms. He walked placidly, evidently quite unconcerned. As he neared them, the policeman asked,

"Is that the girl?"

"That's Helen," Mike whispered, horrified.

She was lying in Bruce's arms, her head hanging back, one arm swung lifelessly out, her feet swaying.

The policeman moved in front of him.

Bruce stopped. He looked at the policeman.

"She wanted to sleep," Bruce said. "So I gave her Bessie's pillow. Bessie didn't mind. Bessie understood. Now we're going to go away. Finally we're going to go away. It's been a full night, but now it's dawn and everything is all right. We're going away, together." ●

# STILL LIFE

by Mark Richards

I WAS sitting at my desk, tapping out a tune with my fingernails when Alice came in. She said hello and went into the kitchen to start to work.

Alice is the girl who comes in and cleans up. After about ten minutes she came out of the kitchen and started to work around me. I was humming Saint-Saen's *Dance Macabre* by that time—a wonderful tune to help your thoughts or so it seemed. Alice looked at me for a while and went back to her sweeping. Then she said, "What's the matter, having troubles?"

"No," I said untruthfully. "I just can't think of anything to write, that's all. You know anything that will make a story?"

"Me?" she asked with a flip of her mop. "No, I don't know a thing." That seemed settled, and I went back to my musical efforts. I noticed Alice stopped by the window, so I said, "What's the matter, having troubles?" She went on with her work, moving rather slowly and still looking out of the window, and then said, "No, what kind of troubles would I be having? I'd sure like to know, though, what it is in that room on the top floor across the way. Looks just like gallows standing there, but I can't see in very well."

I got up, and went to the window, and looked across at the building on 8th Street. I couldn't see very well either, so I sat down again. Nothing seemed to be coming to me, so I got up and said I was going for a walk and would be back before long.

I started down the street with a dozen half-thought stories going through my head, none of them any good. Just another reporter who thought he could write, and was in for a rude awakening any day now. The first of the month, say, when the rent was due. Before I realized it I was walking down 8th Street, near the house Alice had been talking about. I stopped and looked at it, thinking what she had said about the gallows. I thought what the hell, I might as well take a good look and see if there's anything going on in there. I couldn't lose anything but time, and I had plenty of that. So I looked at the bells and the names, but I couldn't make out which was which. They seemed all mixed up. I rang the bell marked "Supt.," and pretty soon an old lady came out. I asked if I could see the room on the top floor, as I had heard it was for rent. She said no, it wasn't for rent, and she didn't have anything right now. I said I'd heard that the top room could be had and had good light for an artist. She said where could I have heard that, and it did have pretty good light, and was being used by an artist right now, a Mr. Vishtel. Had I ever heard of him? I said no, and started away.

A man came in the hall just then, and I waited as she stopped him and talked for a minute before he went upstairs. Then she came back to me and said "That was Mr. Vishtel, and he says he isn't thinking of moving and if I want more money why don't I just say so. So I guess you can see for yourself that it isn't vacant now. I'd like to know how that got around. It being for rent, I mean. Sorry I haven't anything now, but come in again next week. I've got people coming and going all the time, and I've got nice clean rooms. Reasonable, too."

I thanked her and left. So that was who had the top room; Mr. Vishtel. A funny name, but a nice orderly looking man for an artist. No excitement there, I decided, and I started walking again, still trying to think of something I could use for a story.

I dropped in at the *Star* and paid a little call on Harry Jacks. He's the one who took my place when I quit and I get a kick out of going in and finding him there at my old desk. I thought, too, that he might have heard some kind of a yarn that would give me an idea, but he

said Hell no, things were so quiet there wasn't even anything to put in the paper any more. He kidded me a little, the way they always do, about me quitting the paper to write and then not doing any writing, but it didn't seem a bit funny to me that day. Too darned true.

Next morning, I thought I had an idea, and I started in to write like crazy, but about half way through I got stuck. Just nothing coming. So I got up, stretched my legs, lit a cigarette and looked out of the window. Not much inspiration there. Just walls and windows and back yards. Then I thought about this Vishtel and what Alice said about the gallows, and I got my field glasses and took a good look at his window. There was so much sun and the glass was so dirty I couldn't see much, but all of a sudden, just for a second, the sun caught in his room and hung there. And by God, it did look like gallows! Before I could get the glasses focused, the sun was gone from there and that was that. I went back to my desk and tried to write again, but that glimpse kept popping back into my head. So I said what the hell and got up and walked around to 8th Street again, not knowing quite what I would do when I got there.

I thought I might as well go right in and get the thing off my mind, so I rang his bell, and when he clicked the button I beat it upstairs before the landlady could see me. His door wasn't open, so I knocked, and a voice called out and asked who's there. I said, "I just want to speak to you for a minute, Mr. Vishtel." Knowing their name usually gets them and they'll come see, but not this baby. He just said "I'm busy, what do you want to see me about?" I didn't know, but I mumbled something about the coming elections and working to see that everyone voted. He said "I didn't register," and that seemed to be as far as we could go with that conversation. I went back to my room and tried to work but I couldn't concentrate.

I walked around the corner and stood where I could see his door, and after about half an hour, sure enough, he came out. Still not knowing what I wanted to do, or why I was doing it, I tailed him. It wasn't much of a job—he just went into a one-armed lunchroom down the block, and I popped in after him and got some food and ate. I got a good look at him this time, and there certainly wasn't anything remarkable about his looks to keep me following him this way. Just a painter, making not too good a living, and probably having his troubles. He got

up and paid his check and so did I. He turned away from his place, but only went another block or so to an artist's supply store and bought a couple of things. I followed him when he came out, but he went into his apartment and that seemed to be that.

Next morning I decided I'd better do something to get this guy off my mind, and I'd better do it quick. I was wasting my time and hadn't written a line for three days. I made up my mind to forget the whole thing, but I kept going to the window and looking out, and every now and then I'd get the idea that I could really see gallows in there. Once the sun shone in that same way and I could see them plain as day.

That settled it. I took up my post again at the bar across the street and waited for my friend to come out. I spent damn near the whole morning there, and just as I was getting ready for lunch he came out. I followed him, and this time it did some good. He went down into the subway on the uptown side, and I shot back to his house as fast as I could. I rang a bell on the second floor, and pretty soon the clicker worked and I went in. A friendly looking, middle-aged lady was waiting on the second floor. I apologized for disturbing her and said I was collecting funds for relief of flood victims in Texas. I gave her a nice line of talk, and pretty soon she said alright, went and got her bag and gave me a quarter. I got a kick out of that and made a note to add to her quarter, and started upstairs.

When I got up to Vishtel's room I was glad I'd made my plans before I started. There were two locks on the door. One was a big old-fashioned lock under the door knob, but I had one like that at home, and almost any big key will work them. Mine did. The other was a newer lock up above, and no key I had would even fit it. But it was an old building and the door jambs weren't tight, and it was easy to slip a piece of spring steel in beside the moulding and push the catch on the lock. I had it open.

I was kind of nervous by that time. I've bummed around a lot, and as a reporter I've been in too many places where I wasn't wanted, but I'd never tried house breaking before, on my own hook like that, for no good reason. I kept thinking Vishtel might be back any minute, and I didn't know how much time I'd already spent getting those locks open, and what the hell was I doing there anyway. After I looked around for a minute I was sure I didn't know why I was there. Just

another studio. There must have been half a hundred just like it on the same block. Things thrown around in confusion, and canvasses leaning against the walls wherever you looked. A curtain, on rings, shut off one side of the room. Probably the bed and wash stand.

I saw an easel set up in a corner by the window, and walked over to see what he was working on. By that time I was plenty nervous. Something seemed wrong to me and I didn't know what. Just a feeling in the air. I've had it before, when I was working on a story. Call it a hunch. All of a sudden you feel something queer about a place and you know you should get out. I took a quick look at the painting, worrying about every noise I heard, turning every sound into his footstep on the stairs. I wasn't thinking when I looked at the painting, and I started to walk away before I really took it in. Then I tore back and took a good look. Next thing I knew I was getting out of that place as fast as my legs would take me, trying to get both locks fastened, with my fingers all thumbs. I flew down those stairs, and was almost home before I could slow myself down to a walk.

I got back in my own room and took a good stiff drink and sat down to think about what I'd seen. Boy, what a painting! Of course I was nervous before I even looked at it, but just the same that picture was something I wasn't going to forget in a hurry. Vishtel was a better painter than I thought, and he had imagination. The picture was just about finished. It showed, too well, a desolate, hair-raising scene. Three men, or three bodies, hanging. Hanging by their necks until dead. It was awful. It isn't a nice subject at best, and when you come across it in a strange room where you've no right to be, it's no wonder you get the jitters. I felt like a sap, legging it out of there that way after all the trouble I'd had getting in, but it wasn't the place to sit down and think things over. Anyway, it explained Alice's gallows. Probably he had some kind of a scene rigged up against the wall to use for a model—maybe a wall hanging, maybe pieces of wood stuck up there, to give him his proportion. From our window it looked all too real.

Well, my jitters were getting no better fast, so I had another drink and started uptown. I bumped into Harry Jacks up in Times Square and made the rounds with him. I don't remember an awful lot about it, but I do remember Jacks saying he was looking for excitement and something he could cook up a good news yarn about. I kept trying to

tell him about the painting, but he couldn't see anything in that to get excited about. After I'd had about seven more I couldn't either.

Next morning when I woke up I had had what you might call a bad night. I felt awful. Not only a hangover, but I'd been seeing things all night. I took a shower and had some tomato juice and coffee and felt a little better. Shaky, but strong enough to take myself in hand and try to see what the devil I was worrying about. I went over the whole business of Vishtel and the picture and my breaking in and tearing out and I decided I was a sap. Just because an artist had a vivid imagination was no reason for me to go off my nut. He had thought of a morbid and fantastic subject to paint, and painted it. Painted it well. So what? Was I going to lose sleep over some screwball artist? Hell, no. That was settled as easily as that. I got dressed and had some lunch, took a little walk and came back in and started to write. I wasted a lot of paper and took some ink off my typewriter ribbon, but all I turned out was a growing pile of scraps in the waste paper basket. Easy enough to say I wouldn't be bothered by any nutty artist. But I couldn't get that painting out of my head, nor that funny feeling that something was wrong up in that room. Above all, I wanted to see the painting again. I couldn't get away from it.

That painting had something. In fact, from my memory of it, it had everything. Form, design, color, and realism. Boy, what realism. Enough to send me chasing out of that room as though the hounds of hell were after me. But it was more than that. Like any great painting it was more than photographic. That picture was an expression not only of a vivid and macabre scene, but also of the turmoil and torture of the man who had made it. That painting came right out and hit you in the face. And stuck. It might not be the kind of thing you'd want on your living room wall, but it was good. Damn near a masterpiece.

I stopped my writing for the day and went to work on that idea. I went up to 57th Street and went in to see my friend Duraq, the art dealer. You've probably heard of him. We've been good friends for a long time, and I knew he'd do me a favor if I asked him. I asked him if he'd ever heard of Vishtel. He hadn't, and he called up a few of his friends and competitors, and they hadn't either. That was all I wanted to know. Here was Vishtel, entirely unknown, trying to peddle that picture with no entree whatever. And it wasn't a picture anyone

would handle, mind you. No, I figured, he didn't have a chance in the world of getting anywhere with it without a helping hand.

So I told Duraq that I knew this Vishtel, and that he'd been working on a painting, a really great painting. And that it was almost done, but I thought if I played my cards right I could get him, Duraq, a chance to show and handle it. He thought it was pretty funny, my pretending to give him a break by giving him a shot at an absolutely unknown picture, and setting myself up that way as an art critic. But he promised to take a look at it when it was finished if I'd bring it up to him.

So I figured I'd give Vishtel a day or two to finish up, and then I'd go over and tell him I represented Duraq, and wanted to know if he'd like to turn the painting over to Duraq when it was finished. I'd tell him I'd heard through a friend of his that he was working on it, and it was good, or something like that. I figured he'd be so tickled at having Duraq handle the picture he wouldn't stop too long to wonder how I'd heard about it.

So two days later I started over there, all full of good intentions. I was helping Duraq, I was helping Vishtel, I was turning a masterpiece over to the public. I felt good about it. I rang Vishtel's bell, but nothing happened. I remembered that he was cagey about seeing people, and probably just wasn't answering. So I rang a first floor bell, and beat it upstairs before anyone saw me. I knocked on Vishtel's door, and got no answer. I listened carefully, thinking he might be lying low, but there wasn't a sound, and I was pretty sure the room was empty. You know the way the silence sounds when you're all alone. Well, I thought, that was that for the day. But why couldn't I get another look at the painting? If I'd seen it once that way, I could see it again, and to tell the truth I sort of wanted another look at it before I made any more rash promises.

The locks opened the same way they had before, only a little easier. The room looked about the same, maybe a little messier. I went over and looked at the painting. This time it didn't make me want to run, it held me there, fascinated. It was as good as I thought it was, maybe better, now that it was finished. I don't know how long I stood there looking at it, but all of a sudden that same funny feeling came over me. Just panic. I wanted to run. I was somewhere where I shouldn't be, and something was wrong. I couldn't tell what. The usual street noises came



in the window, but it seemed terribly quiet, sort of an airless silence like a vacuum. I could hear busses stopping at the corner; the cars in the street. But it all seemed far far away. I was nervous as hell, but I wasn't going to let it get me this time. I was going to stay right there until it went away.

I walked over to the curtain and looked in back of it. If there had been any strength left in me to scream with, I would have screamed. Maybe I did. I wouldn't know. Then I thought I was seeing things and looked again. I pushed the curtain all the way back this time. I wasn't seeing things.

There against the wall was the scene Vishtel was painting. There were the gallows, all right, and from each one a dead man hanging. I couldn't move for a minute, and then I realized that this had been in the back of my mind ever since I'd seen that painting. It was too good to be painted from imagination. Those were real dead men hanging there.

The blood came back slowly into my legs, and I walked over and touched one of the bodies. Dead as could be. One touch of the stiff heavy arm told me that. And the faint odor around them told me something else—Vishtel had been working fast, but he'd finished his painting just about in time.

I pulled the curtain back in place and went again to the easel. I worked slowly, deliberately, like one whose actions are all thought out. As a matter of fact, I wasn't thinking at all. I was too stunned. What I did I did from instinct.

I took out my knife and ripped the painting off the stretchers. I rolled it up loosely and put it under my coat. I locked the door behind me, walked slowly down the stairs and around to my house. It wasn't till I was nearly there that the devil got after me again and I began to run.

I drank half a water-glass of Scotch and got right on the telephone. I called Jacks up and told him I had a story for him. To take two cops and go to Vishtel's room and wait there. I told him a little about it, and gave him a message to give to Vishtel. Just tell him, I said, that his painting was up at Duraq's.

The rest was easy. You probably read about it in the papers that afternoon. The Star had a scoop. Duraq had a lot of publicity, and he loved it. He knew what to do with it, too. He charged \$10,000 for the picture, and he got it. Vishtel used most of it to hire a lawyer to plead

insanity for him, and it worked, as it should.

Sure he was nuts. Nuts about that picture, that's all. Up to then he'd been alright, leading a decent, quiet life, painting like hell and not getting anywhere. All of a sudden one day he thought he'd like to paint that picture. There didn't seem to be any way he could, so he tried to forget about it. He just couldn't. He kept on thinking about it and planning it and working it out in his mind and all of a sudden one day he knew he just had to. That was all. He picked up three bums, one at a time, told them he'd pay them to pose for him, and then killed them. Just like that.

Well, he painted it, and do you know I don't think he minds at all now about spending the rest of his life in the cooler. He's just sort of quiet and contented-like and doesn't cause any one any trouble. Ten thousand dollars, he keeps saying. Just for my painting. But it was a good one, wasn't it?

So that's how it turned out. Vishtel got his painting sold. Duraq got a fat commission. Jacks got a scoop. Me? What the hell, I got a story. ●





# THE PERSUADER

by Irving Schiffer

**M**ATTERS of the occult were the raging fad on the West Coast; but even devotees of such arts knew naught of what to expect from a so-called amateur spiritualist. Eric Anthiel felt no compunction as he queried his round, bubbling, Bel Air hostess about her cocktail party guests. Loretta McKibbin was actually quite flattered by his whispered questions; she responded cutely, knowingly, believing precisely what he wanted her to believe—that his parlor entertainment would include some sort of mind reading routine for which he required this preparatory information about the audience. He thoroughly realized that his questions made the old battleaxe feel like part of the act.

He waited until the moment she was ready to announce him to her fifty-odd guests before informing her, as though on a sudden whim, that he was enjoying her party so much that he wanted to top off her evening with a display of hypnotic powers.

"Can you?" she wheezed. "Can you really hypnotize people?"

He assured her he could. On the premise that it was best to tell her as little as possible, he did not bother to explain that not long ago, when he first hoped for a stage career back east, he had actually attended a school where the mesmeric art was taught. He had finally abandoned it as unprofitable, since there was little call for stage hypnotism, and he had come to the Coast to make his name at the studios. But here he found that thousands of other handsome young would be leading men were also haunting the movie studios. Like most of them he remained untested, unknown, an abysmal flop. Now he worked in the West Coast office of a movie-television magazine, little more than a glorified editorial clerk, going to as many parties as possible, hoping to make some of his contacts with the movie colony pay off. He had met this idiotic Loretta McKibbin at one of those recent parties, at a seance, of all things. It was a fateful meeting, for that evening had considerably crystallized his thoughts about his own needs and ambitions.

In her contagious, enthusiastic way, Mrs. McKibbin announced her amateur hypnotist to her guests, whereupon they pitched in, young and old alike, to move chairs and couches so that one side of the room was cleared for a makeshift stage. The lights were dimmed and Eric commenced. He knew he cast an impressive figure in his rented tuxedo; he had the aspiring actor's awareness of his own dark, angry good looks and handsome mane of black hair, and he decidedly appreciated the sound and effect of his own commanding voice.

Employing the usual soothing deep-deep incantations, he attempted a mass hypnosis. A small percentage responded—seven—and these few were then led zombie-like past craning necks to the seats "on stage." The spectators were impressed; the only audible detractor, surprisingly, was Mrs. McKibbin, the hostess, who clearly felt it her duty to absolve herself of his possible incompetence by murmuring to those seated near her that she really believed hypnotism to be a fake, but wasn't it fun anyway? . . . Eric wished for a moment he had succeeded in putting her under, if only to see how she would look with her mouth closed. He glared at her darkly, silencing her and then turned to his wooden Indians, noting with satisfaction that among the seven was one sleeping beauty by the name of Franu Darrow. Mrs. McKibbin had earlier supplied him with several interesting facts about

this slender girl with the short, wheat-colored hair.

Eric allowed his hypnotized subjects to stew temporarily in their own stupors while he addressed his audience. For these God-fearing people he offered a short verbal attack on popular "misconceptions" regarding his worthy art. He told how hypnotism today was being used for therapeutic and even surgical purposes in hospitals; he told how safe and scientific it was, how foolish were the old Trilby-inspired superstitions. He explained that no hypnotized subject could possibly be made to act contrary to his or her moral or ethical convictions.

To illustrate this point, Eric commanded one of his stupefied seven, a stout matron, to rise from her seat on stage. He then implored this matron to run off with him, to leave her family and responsibilities to live a life of gay sin with him. The woman suffered considerably but stood her ground.

"See!" Eric told his audience. "I cannot make this woman do anything contrary to her basic convictions and principles!"

Examining the rapt faces of the spectators, he could see that they believed this nonsense. As for the safety and "science" of this ancient art, he had personally seen subjects go completely berserk, beyond the recall of any hypnotist; he had seen solid citizens at just such parties as this deteriorate to the level of crazed and dangerous animals. As for ethics and morality, his proof-positive notwithstanding, he knew he could personally make every one of these people on stage do anything he wanted them to do, convictions or not. On its crudest level of application, for example, he could have convinced this responsible matron to run off with him simply by convincing her first that she was a widow and that he was her new boy friend or even her new husband—a mere change of context.

But he enjoyed delivering the spiel, enjoyed experiencing the mass stupidity of the audience. He had suffered a nerve-wracking day, constantly reminded of the last few dollars left in his pocket after the weekend, an awareness that always made him feel uneasy, frayed, unshaven, ill-equipped. It was a purgative to be able to control and dispise his wealthy audience at this moment.

Nonetheless, it was for their pleasure, their distraction rather, that he went through the usual hypnotist's routine, all of which he had done many times in his parlor-game days back east. He subjected one of his

zombies, a strapping young man, to some physical ordeals, burning matches under the man's outstretched palm, placing the man's feet on a chair and then sitting on the subject's extended legs; he convinced a chubby young lady that she was a Zulu native dancing bare-footed on a bed of hot coals; he told a confirmed cigarette smoker that his next cigarette upon awakening would sicken him and taste of straw—then he wakened the man and allowed him to light a cigarette, then cough and sputter to the audience's delight. And he singled out Frann Darrow of course for the Washington-Lincoln routine.

This sleeping beauty was given the post-hypnotic suggestion that after she was wakened and sent off the stage to sit in the audience, she would immediately succumb to a deep hypnosis every time he said the word "Washington" and would be released from the spell only by his utterance of the word "Lincoln." He then snapped her awake and sent her to sit among the spectators—her bluish eyes blinking with bewilderment as she left the stage, evidently at a loss to understand what she had been doing there in the first place.

The hypnotist promptly forgot her and commenced to busy himself with an elderly man whom he sent off on a visit to his fourth grade teacher; the old man babbled, apologizing in a child's falsetto because the teacher, according to Eric, had castigated him for being a bad, bad boy.

Suddenly Eric turned to the audience and said, "I wonder if they had any hypnotists in George Washington's time," and then turned his back to the audience again. Immediately he heard titters behind him: Frann, in her seat, was asleep. To prove it, Eric put her through a few stiff-armed calisthenics before releasing her with mention of Lincoln. Later in his act he surprised her again. This time he noted that she responded more readily and, judging from her rate of breathing, had been triggered to an even greater depth of compliance. This time he tarried even longer before releasing her.

His entertainment was an unqualified success. Several guests invited him to future parties of their own, none of which he intended to grace with his presence, although he did not say so. Even Mrs. McKibbin, still the skeptic, showered him with compliments for his showmanship. Finally the guests departed, singly and in pairs. Frann left singly. And emerging into the cool night air a few seconds afterward was Eric

Anthiel.

"Hope I don't have difficulty getting a bus or a taxi down on the avenue," he commented bravely, as he held open the gate for her. "Perhaps I should have telephoned for a cab before I left."

"Oh . . . don't you have a car?" She seemed genuinely surprised that anyone in Los Angeles did not have a car. She stood in the street, hesitant and quite pretty in a tan, upturned coat, her hazel-flecked eyes indecisive as he explained that he had only recently sold his old jalopy. "Well, if you don't live far . . ." she offered tentatively.

It was a white sports car. Frann was somewhat wary about having a stranger beside her, but he soon put her at ease with inconsequential conversation and a willingness to remain on his side of the vehicle. He was careful to intersperse the instructions to his address with apologetic remarks such as, "This is certainly very kind of you, Miss Darrow . . . I hope it isn't too much out of your way . . ." He also remembered to tell her briefly about his editorial post on the magazine and to get in a word about the location of his office. Frann said very little about herself; she didn't have to; her clothes, her car, her untroubled poise, told the story—one of tremendous wealth, of lifelong pampering and security . . .

The dark lane where she stopped the car at his request was actually a few streets away from the grubby building where he had rooms. Her hands rested lightly on the wheel as she waited for him to let himself out. "Goodnight, Mr. Anthiel," she said politely, firmly.

He reached agreeably for the door handle.

"Thank you so much, Miss Darrow," he said. "Thank you from here to Washington."

It worked at once, as he had known it would.

He sent Frann back to her childhood. She was seven; her father, a dictatorial cuss, had refused to allow her to play at the house of a girl friend named Annabelle who was very poor; her father, mean and rich, did not approve of alliances with those who were poor—and her father even made up terrible lies about the character of Annabelle.

Her eyes tightly closed in pain, Frann suffered the hot fantasied coals of parental cruelty and deception. The car motor idled soothingly; her hands vibrated limply on the wheel; but she was far away, crying her heart out somewhere in the past: "*Oh, Daddy, please let me play with*

*Annabelle . . .*"

He instructed that she would never forget this heartless deception, even in adulthood, even in consciousness. She was to forget, however, that he, Eric, had "entertained" at the party where she had met him, and she was never to mention him at all to her elderly father. He reminded her of her constant obligation to Mr. Washington. He told her that the kisses of boy friends she now dated would henceforth sicken her and that she would begin to find manly virtues only in Eric Anthiel. And one evening next week, he instructed, she was to drive to his office to pick him up after work.

It was wiser, he decided, not to tell her why she would want to intercept him leaving his office one night next week. Far better to let her suffer a loss of self-respect as she tried to resist for a few days and then failed to stay away. Far better that she supplied her own rationalization for this surprising and unseemly forwardness.

He wakened her; and as she opened her eyes, he was stepping from the car, still murmuring his thanks for the ride.

She covered up beautifully. She blinked a few times and frowned over a puzzling sense of time lapse. But an automatic smile and that inbred poise pulled her through.

A few moments later he was standing alone, watching the car move off. It moved slowly, with some uncertainty. Ah, yes, there must be something on the poor girl's mind . . .

\* \* \*

He saw her during lunch hour on Tuesday. He saw her as he walked, idly window-shopping along Wilshire Boulevard as was his habit, catching her fleeting reflection in odd-slanted store windows. It was eerie.

She followed him hungrily, furtively at a distance, like some foolish teenager tracking her movie idol. She could not stop herself from this fascination, he fully realized; yet she was too shy, too properly trained to approach him now. By the end of the week her training would matter little. She was battling him now; she had come to view her strange tormentor; but her impulse would win. Clearly she would not be able to hold out until Friday. Thursday it would be.

On Thursday, as he emerged from his office building, the white car was parked right at the entrance. Deliberately he walked quickly past, offering her no opportunity to call to him casually from her seat. In-



stead she had to scramble out of the car and chase him almost to the corner on foot, calling his name.

He turned. He pretended annoyance at this public confrontation—pretended, too, that he did not recognize the slim, richly dressed girl. He watched her die a thousand deaths under his cool gaze before she found her voice.

"Eric, don't you remember me? Frann . . ."

It took him a while, but he finally remembered. "Oh, yes, you gave me a lift home from a party the other night. You were very kind." He grinned at her charmingly. "Have you come to offer me another ride?"

"Well . . . I was just driving by . . . and I happened to remember you worked here . . ."

"Wonderful!" He took her hands in his. She was trembling. "Yes, I accept another ride! Where's your car?"

He watched her silently as she maneuvered through the traffic, saying nothing to alleviate her self-consciousness until they were well downtown. Then he shook his head at a wistful thought.

"I wish I could play my part," he said sadly.

"Your part, Eric?"

He inhaled her fresh, faint perfume and smiled at her fondly. "I mean, I'd like to take you to some fine place for dinner, and then to some expensive show or night-spot. But it's Thursday, and a working man is always broke this time of week."

"Oh, I don't care how expensive . . . any place will do for me, Eric . . ." He could see that he had given her new life. Staring straight ahead, not daring to look at him, she timidly edged her handbag toward him across the seat. ". . . Whatever you think you'll need . . ."

She was visibly frightened, a little shocked at her own daring and fearful of his rebuff. As for himself, he felt no humiliation in withdrawing some bills from her wallet. The humiliation was hers, even though she was too stupid to realize it, for having to pay for an evening with a young man—like some old lady with a gigolo. But the sight of all the money she carried so casually enraged him nonetheless; he saw that what she considered her daily pin money was almost two weeks' salary for him.

In the restaurant he was able to release some of his pique by intimidating the waiter, refusing to allow the man to rush him in giving

their order, stating what he wanted so specifically and insolently that the waiter knew he was threatening to return that which was not fulfilled to the letter. Frann noticed none of this drama, so intent was she on learning all about her handsome gigolo.

Throughout dinner she asked questions about every phase of his life. He had never lied so consistently or so well. She told about herself, too, some of which he already knew from the loquacious Loretta McKibbin: that Frann was an only child, motherless for seven years now, since the age of thirteen; that her wealthy father was now wedded to a pair of crutches, the result of the very auto accident that had claimed her mother (and one incompetent chauffeur); that Frann was the child of William Darrow's later years and the only meaning and joy in his semi-invalid life . . .

It was Frann, not he, who suggested after dinner—perhaps to save his working-man's ego—that they go to a drive-in theatre. And once within the confines of that strange modern paradox of flickering herd instinct and secretive isolation car by car, it was she who softened the movie's volume and shyly leaned on his shoulder. And how could he not then, under these circumstances, pay verbal homage to the father of his country?

So he put her to sleep on his shoulder and discussed with her the cruel unreasonableness of her widowed father in not allowing her to go to parties when she was fourteen and fifteen simply because there were boys at these parties who did not belong to families of great wealth. To discourage such friendships, her father would fabricate terrible tales about the boys. Even today, Eric pointed out, her father would not approve of a suitor who did not possess wealth; she could not, therefore—must not, therefore—tell him about Eric.

As for more immediate suggestions, Eric was convinced that it was unnecessary to further inflame her passion for his person, at least not here in the traditional lovers' atmosphere of the outdoor theatre. What he hoped to achieve in his control of Frann was a perfect balance of unconscious influence and normal, everyday dictatorship. He was like a research chemist seeking the medical compound that worked best and had the least side effects. He knew very well that if he deprived her entirely of will, stripped her of all identity, he would have a sick girl on his hands, perhaps an uncontrollable one. He preferred to use the

tools of commitment, of logic, of nature, wherever possible.

He did not suggest to her, for instance, that when she awakened she would ask to come to his dingy room. He merely recommended his own attractiveness in no uncertain terms—in contrast to the oafishness of other men; he merely told her that the mere thought of losing him would be like the end of the world. The logic of eventual abandon was already on his side. After all, *she* had sought *him* out; *she* had paid for *his* dinner; *she* had led *him* here. Feminine coyness at this point would be ridiculous. In fact, his very restraint and gallantry in not taking advantage of her tonight, as was his resolve, would only deepen her conscious trust in him, her respect for his character. And that above all other conquests was the true goal.

So he did not lead her astray for the moment. He did tell her, however, before releasing her, that she would pick him up once again at his office on Monday evening. When he brought her back to life, she was still merely leaning on his shoulder, an innocent California beauty, gazing into the eyes of her admirer.

“. . . I must have fallen asleep . . .”

“You napped,” he whispered. “You were beautiful.”

She wasn't coy at all as he kissed her. Now that she had found him, she vowed, losing him would be like the end of the world. Later, as she rested limply in his arms across the front seat of the car, her lover became sad, murmuring gloomily how useless was his burning love for a girl like her.

“Your father wouldn't want you seeing someone like me,” he told her in desolate self-deprecation, turning to stare out at the silent, ghostly giants on the screen. “He'll say I'm a fortune hunter, that I have no prospects . . .”

Frann silenced him. “No, he won't, he won't. I mean, how could he? After all, *I* chased after *you* . . . so how could he say . . .” Then she became unsure about her father. “Naturally he'll be concerned, Eric. But once he gets to know you . . .”

“Have you mentioned me at all?” he asked shrewdly, throwing her into troubled confusion. “*Will* you tell him about me?”

She pressed her fingers to her temples. “No, not yet. You see, he depends on me so . . . Oh, I just can't think straight. Please don't be serious tonight, Eric. Just kiss me, don't ever stop . . .”

And so on.

That night he said nothing about seeing her again, compelling her to ask him for a date on Monday. This she did later after a painful battle with her maidenly modesty while parked outside his residence. It was pitiful the way she expressed her urgent need to be at his office Monday evening—as instructed—while at the same time trying to salvage some of her pride. He made it as difficult for her as possible.

"All right, you'll be waiting outside my office again," he said with a shrug. "But I don't understand why I can't call for you at your house instead. Are you ashamed to have me meet your father?"

This she denied, as she did again on Monday and on subsequent evenings and weekends, whenever he forced the issue. And whenever he put her to sleep on some lonely street or hill he reinstructed her never to mention him to her father, and then he moodily pressed the issue in her waking moments. Within two weeks he had her in such a state of hysteria over this conflict that she would beg him not to mention that other man in her life . . . that other man she was beginning to hate.

Her heart was warmed-over putty in his hands by this time, a state of affairs that no longer required constant enforcement by messages from the subconscious. He had completely broken her pride. No one need tell him that she had never before humbled and thrown herself at any other man before. In her dreams she heard nothing but his voice (a direct quote from her tremulous lips); other men were physically abhorrent to her (those sickening oafs!). And she reported to him one day: "I know you won't believe me, Eric, but sometimes when I look at the street or a cloud, it's your face I see. It's as though you block out the whole sky . . ."

Eventually he got to the business at hand; the business of dear old dad. In the name of George Washington, he planted the momentous idea of arranging a meeting between father and lover, of fighting, too, for the right to marry whomever she chose in this great democracy. He continued to rewrite her history—life with father—and to blacken the picture of parental snobbery and deceit as the ruination of her life.

Then, with the threat of abandoning her, he created the final crisis. It was a Saturday afternoon. They had driven down the coast and

were standing hand in hand on a romantic bluff of rocks. Staring thus at the vast, frightening ocean, he scared the wits out of his beloved by declaring angrily that this was the last day they would ever spend together. He could no longer bear the pain, he told her, of loving a woman who allowed a father to dictate the course of her life. He would never see her again.

Frann broke down. Categorically he shook off her tears, her entreaties and her passionate proposal of marriage.

"No. We'll never marry. Your father will talk you out of it as soon as you tell him. Do you think I'm going to subject myself to that kind of humiliation? It's better that we stop seeing each other right now."

"I don't care what my father says!" she cried. "I can't lose you, Eric. I won't . . ."

He looked at her tear-stricken face unhappily, trying to believe her, succumbing finally to the love which was bigger than both of them. "Come, I'll take you home . . . to my place . . ."

"Yes," she replied, "yes . . ."

Later, in the darkness of his room, he asked: "Are you sure? Your father will fight for you. He'll lie. Those things you told me he did when you were younger . . . he'll make up the same kind of lies and stories about me . . ."

"I'm sure. There's nothing he could say that could possibly stop me now. Tomorrow, darling. Tomorrow you'll come to the house. I'll arrange it—he'll be expecting you. I'll convince him, dear heart. When he sees how much we love each other, he won't stand in our way . . ."

\* \* \*

The next morning—Sunday—Eric woke late, had a leisurely breakfast at a coffee shop and then taxied out to her father's Bel Air estate. It was all incredibly Old South: here was the winding road up to the stately house traversed by the taxi, the butler to open the door, the anxious bride-to-be fluttering about.

"He's in the library," she said in hushed tones. "He's waiting for you, Eric darling. I told him . . . Don't worry, dear, he'll like you . . ."

Then, as the young suitor walked alone toward the library to ask for the fair maiden's hand, the fair maiden disappeared, melting decorously into some far portion of the house. Truly incredible, thought Eric, as he knocked at the library door.

"Come in," roared the voice beyond.

In a high-backed chair sat the master of the house, large, wide-shouldered, with the shoulders of a user of crutches. The face was stern, granite-handsome, the hair completely white. A somber colored shawl over the man's knees and the crutches leaning against one curved arm of the chair, like some kingly scepter, added dignity and authority to the powerful man. For Eric there was no welcome handshake. Casually, youthfully, he dropped into a chair facing his adversary. The old man glared at him.

"So you're the young man who has been seeing Frann. Do you realize that I've never heard your name until this morning? And the first time I hear it, my daughter tells me you intend to ask to *marry* her!" The steely eyes blazed into Eric's. "Frankly, Mr. Anthiel, I do not give my consent. If you have been seeing my daughter for some time, then I want to know why you haven't called for her here. Why haven't I met you before? I would like an explanation."

Eric crossed a leg over his knee and swung it back and forth, shrugging his slim shoulders. "Your daughter is very much in love with me, Mr. Darrow. She wants to marry me. At this point, explanations would be a waste of time."

"In love with *you*?" The big man's eyes narrowed. "You mean, don't you, that you're in love with my daughter and want to marry her—isn't that what you meant to say?"

The visitor shook his head. "I said what I meant. *She* loves *me*. Personally, I can't stand the sight of her."

The face reddened. The man rose threateningly, reaching for the crutches.

"You'd better hear me out," said Eric. "If you force me to, Mr. Darrow, I'll marry her anyway. I can make her life pretty miserable, you know. And I can easily arrange it so that you'd never see her again . . ."

"Yes, continue, continue," said the enraged father. "Let's hear all of it. Go on . . ."

"Cash, Mr. Darrow. Not much. Nothing that you'd miss anyway. Pay me and I disappear—and your daughter stays on as the apple of your eye. But if you fight me, I'll take her away from you."

Mr. Darrow was at the pull cord now, summoning the butler. He

stalked about the room on his crutches, glaring at Eric as though holding himself from physical violence. When the butler appeared, he snapped, "Send in my daughter!"

"I wouldn't if I were you," Eric advised as the servant departed. "Don't you realize how painful this can be for a girl who's in love?"

The old man was confident. "You give yourself too much credit. My daughter's a Darrow; she couldn't be seriously in love with the likes of you. Yes, she'll learn of this—and so will the police."

Frann was all eyes as she entered, turning from one to the other of her two loves, hoping to find that they had grown to love each other. But she soon caught the message.

"Frann . . ." Her father cleared his throat. "Frann, dear, I would prefer to spare your feelings, but I can think of no easy way to say this. Mr. Anthiel is nothing but a scoundrel and a blackmailer. All he wants is money."

"*Money?*" The bewildered girl stared at him and then at her lover. Eric raised his eyes to the ceiling as though in search of the uppermost height of this absurdity.

"He doesn't love you," said her father. "He's using your infatuation to threaten me. He wants to be bought off. Nothing but a cheap, common blackmailer. Oh, I can't say I'm surprised. You must have known what kind of weasel he was, or else you wouldn't have sneaked off behind my back to be with him. I hope this has taught you—" Frann was shaking her head.

"Oh, Father, how can you tell such horrible lies?"

"What did you say?"

"Lies. Lies. You always lied to me—whenever you wanted to stop me from seeing anyone I really liked. Just because they didn't have money . . ."

Mr. Darrow thought she was losing her mind. "Frann, what are you talking about?"

"I'm not a child any longer!" She moved across the room to stand with Eric. "You can't turn me against him, Father. I love him. Don't you understand that?"

"*Frann, I forbid you to touch that man!*" He came at them with amazing speed, raising one crutch threateningly.

But the daughter pivoted between them, wrapping her arms about

Eric. The crutch stayed in mid-air. The father stared at her trembling shoulders. He slowly retreated, sinking into his chair.

"I don't see how this can happen . . ." The white head shook in disbelief. "All these years of perfect trust and understanding between us . . . How could you think that I'd . . . How could you take *his* word. . . ?"

The young suitor, his arm about the girl's waist, faced the demented man bravely. "Mr. Darrow, your daughter and I love each other. Won't you give us your blessing?"

"I'll give you," said Mr. Darrow, "five thousand dollars. Not a penny more."

Eric shook his head sadly. "Please, sir, please don't continue this farce."

"Seven thousand then!"

"*Father!*"

Mr. Darrow winced and then looked at her with paternal compassion. "Yes, forgive me, my dear. I misjudged your young man . . . considerably. You'd better wait outside, dear, so that we can talk . . . get to know each other . . ."

Frann looked at Eric, who nodded reassuringly. He could see that the old man had decided to be practical and could probably be convinced to double his last figure. Thank heaven for that. It would have been such a bother to waste months by marrying the girl and causing the old man's capitulation through her suffering. Now he would be free to go on to a new conquest, a quick profit. Impatiently he watched Frann walk hesitantly to the door and open it. Then a chill went through his body. For there, framed in the doorway, her hand raised to knock, was Loretta McKibbin.

"I know, I know, William . . . your man told me not to bother you now . . . but I just haven't time to wait." She was in the room in a few quick steps. "I'll be late to church as it is . . . have to dash right off . . . just dropped in to see how you are . . . haven't seen you in a coon's age, Frann, who's your tall, handsome—" She threw up her hands in delight. "It's the *hypnotist!*"

All eyes were on the hypnotist.

"The what?" inquired Mr. Darrow.

"At my party . . . and I must say it was the most successful party



I ever had! Oh, I should have *known* they were really old friends, he and Frann . . . but he fooled me by asking me all those questions about you and about her. Honestly, William, you should see him and Frann put on their act. *Washington! Jefferson! Hocus! Pocus!* Of course I knew all the time it was an act . . . but what an act! Your daughter's a real actress . . . walking around in a trance . . . just like Boris Karloff or something . . ."

"Mrs. McKibbin," said Frann, "whatever are you talking about?"

"Now stop twitting me, Frann." She put her face close to the girl and chucked Frann under the chin and growled, "*Washington! Jefferson!*" and then giggled.

Mr. Darrow glanced at Eric, who pretended to be occupied examining titles at the bookshelves. Frann was frowning, still in puzzled semi-understanding.

But her father was absorbing the light as eagerly as a young sunflower—doing all in his power to deflect Loretta McKibbin's solicitude about his health and to get her to talk of his daughter's and Eric's "performance." But Mrs. McKibbin would have none of it.

"No . . . I've got to dash off . . . just came by to leave a little ray of sunshine. I'm so glad you've got company today, William. Do ask them to put on their act for you . . . you'll love it . . ."

And she was gone.

After the tornado had subsided, Eric took inventory of the landscape. The old man, of course, was looking right through him. Frann's lovely brow was furrowed thoughtfully in an attempt to deny all sorts of things to herself . . . things like those odd lapses and catnaps when with her beloved.

"So that," said the old man, "explains the influence you seem to have over my daughter."

Frann shook her head imploringly. "You didn't hypnotize me, did you, Eric? You didn't make me—you haven't used it to—"

"*Washington!*" he said.

Mr. Darrow's face drained completely of color as he watched his daughter turn into a statue. Brusquely, Eric ordered her to sit in an armchair at the far side of the room. She obeyed. The old man seemed about to become hysterical.

"Easy . . ." Eric cautioned him. He seated himself close to the dis-

traught father, his own back turned contemptuously to the entranced girl. "Don't worry, Mr. Darrow, it doesn't hurt her. I just wanted to prove to you . . ."

Mr. Darrow stared beyond at his daughter in disbelief. "You just say 'Washington' or 'Jefferson' and she's hypnotized? I don't understand. How does that—"

"Not Jefferson—Lincoln! That dizzy McKibbin! The point is, Mr. Darrow, that I can hypnotize your cute little daughter any time I want, and I can make her do or believe anything I choose. She may realize now what I've been doing to her all these weeks, but I can erase everything Mrs. McKibbin said from her mind. And if you told her all this happened, she'd actually call you a liar. I've already convinced her of that—as you know—that you're a liar. So don't think you can beat me out, or that you can reason with your daughter. You'll still have to pay if you want me to let her go . . ."

Mr. Darrow was not listening. He was staring over Eric's head as though he saw a ghost . . . almost as though Frann could have risen and come up behind Eric's chair. Eric, hunching his shoulders, had the eeriest feeling . . .

Then he *felt* her behind his chair. He scrambled to his feet and shook his head at the impossibility, looking fearfully into Frann's hating eyes.

"*Monster . . .*" she breathed.

He could not stop his own trembling. Then he looked at her shrewdly. "I said 'Lincoln,' didn't I? I must have said 'Lincoln' . . ."

Her eyes were pools of contempt.

"Well, we just can't allow this, can we?" He was recovering his composure. "Sorry, Frann, but I'll just have to—"

They were his last words. No other sound got past the grip of Mr. Darrow's hands tightening about his throat from behind. Even as he was on his knees, blacking out, Eric was pointing at Frann, trying to say "Washington" at her; but no word came from his moving lips.

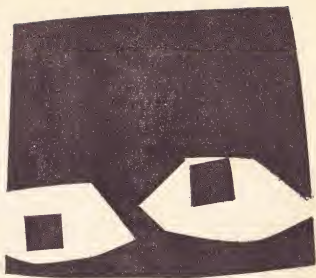
Distantly he heard Mr. Darrow's commanding voice.

". . . No, Frann, don't hit him . . . put that down . . . just go . . . fetch the police . . . and don't come back in this room. . . I have no intention of killing him . . . only putting him to sleep . . ."

After that all was blackness. Like the core of a man's soul. A deep, deep, deep, deep blackness . . .



# THE IDOL



by Joe Mackey

**A**LLAN Garth hunched on an ottoman in his studio and stared with hypnotic intensity at his masterpiece of grotesquerie. The human-sized ebony carving stared back at him with impassive malignity out of garnet eyes.

His concentration was so absolute that he was unaware of the muted Manhattan symphony beyond his walls and of the ebbing light as dusk shadowed the city.

The hideous, gleaming idol was, he knew, his greatest work, a creation far surpassing those that had won him a niche in the world of art and brought him wealth enough to roam the byways of the world.

He had seen the original in a remote temple in the Eastern Ghats of Southern India, twelve days' hard journey from Madras. He had lived from moon to moon with a hill tribe before being permitted to enter the sanctum, and when he had dared to try to photograph the idol his

camera had been smashed and he had barely escaped physical violence. It had taken days more of cajolery, plus an "offering" of many rupees, before he had been allowed to make a rough sketch of the idol.

Even now he did not know her name. Such knowledge was not for the mind of other than the true believer. He knew only that she was a goddess of men's souls, vengeful and implacable, and that he had become obsessed with translating her fearsome majesty into ebony.

Under his scrutiny now was the squat body; the eight arms outstretched as if beckoning or offering a gruesome embrace; the demoniac visage surmounted by a headdress containing a cluster of miniature skulls. The finished carving—finished as far as his hands could achieve—seemed all but alive, and now Garth was trying by sheer force of will to instill into the core of the midnight wood a living part of himself, of his mind or spirit.

His efforts would have elicited a smile, or a significant tapping of forefinger to temple, from most "civilized" men, but as an explorer and anthropologist Garth had witnessed—and even participated in—macabre rites and feats. He knew secrets of voodoo and sorcery; he was well-versed in the more sophisticated arts of telepathy, hypnotism and thought-transference, and in parts of Africa and Asia he had *seen* inanimate objects moved by the power of thought.

Garth saw no paradox—as he sat in the deepening twilight of his studio in the world's most modern and material metropolis—in using the cabala of Indian cults and Congo witch doctors to try to project a spark of his living consciousness into the carven goddess, to give her more than his artist's tools could provide and to make her more than a work of art.

Even without that added inner spark, the idol, he knew, would give him one of the three things he still desired. At 40, thrice-married and thrice-divorced, jaded after two lusty, roistering decades of feverish pleasure-seeking and equally fanatical work, he wanted just three things: lasting fame; a measure of tranquility, in the presence of beauty—and Nikki.

The ebony goddess would insure him of the first. Nikki could bring him the second, and much more.

As these thoughts invaded his contemplation of the goddess, he closed his eyes against her mindless garnet stare, relaxed his rugged bulk, and ran a hand through his blond, gray-streaked leonine mane.

Nikki. Half his age and the daughter of one of his patrons—Lepescu, a mysterious and gauchely elegant Midas—she was a sprite, an enchant-

ing mixture of naivete and wisdom. He thought of her as quicksilver. Her vitality was boundless, but it did not draw from others; rather, she seemed to *give* to them. Aside from her radiance and beauty, he felt that he could somehow regain from her his waning enthusiasm for life.

Nikki, though, had kept their relationship on a platonic plane. A short, wry rumble of laughter came from Garth's chest. Women had loved him in a score of capitals and in deserts, mountains and jungles, and now he was mooning like a juvenile over a virginal elf with a crown of unruly jet hair and Circe's eyes.

He sighed, stretched and resumed his striving for dark rapport with the goddess, becoming so engrossed that he did not hear the first few sprightly knocks on the oaken door of his studio. Then, with a start, he returned to reality. Nikki! He had invited her to view his masterwork.

He swung wide the door and there she stood, barely reaching his shoulder, her head tilted piquantly, a little-girl smile on her lips and a woman's smile in her eyes. He took her small white hands in his strong but strangely gentle ones and drew her in. She kissed him fleetingly on the cheek and brushed by.

Nikki wrinkled her nose in mock alarm. "Old air, no food-smells. Has Allan been suffocating himself again and forgetting to eat?"

"Don't scold me, Tinker Bell," he said, smiling fondly down at her.

Her eyes roved the room—the walls hung with dozens of masks, paintings, posters, shields and spears; the corners cluttered with trophies from an atlas-full of faraway lands; Garth's work-bench, a silent bedlam of knives, brushes and palettes, and the floor-space, hidden by pedestals, busts, carvings in wood and marble and granite—and she shook her head. The gesture said "You need a woman around the house." But *she* didn't say it.

Garth watched to see her reaction when she first spied the goddess. When she did, suddenly, she recoiled a step and her jaw dropped. Then she went forward, gingerly, fascinated, and studied the carving in silence. Finally she shuddered slightly and turned to Garth.

"It's overwhelming, Allan. But so ugly." Afraid she had hurt him, she hurried to him and took his hands. "Dear, dear Allan. I know what an honor it is to be asked to be the first to see this. I only wish I had the knowledge to appreciate it fully. But, what I mean is, it makes me uncomfortable. It seems so malevolent, and almost alive. That's a tribute, you know."

"I take it that way. She's supposed to be hideous. And malevolent. And—almost alive." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Well, don't

I get a reward for being a genius?" He bent down to kiss her. She brushed his lips lightly, then disengaged herself and danced away.

"You *are* a genius," she said. "Think of me, I know a real live genius."

He smiled. "Well, let's sit down and talk about my genius, and your adorability. I'll make some drinks."

A frown shadowed her brow. "I'm so sorry, Allan. I have an appointment I can't possibly break."

"Those are the easiest kind to break."

"No, really. And my father's waiting downstairs."

"Your father? What for?"

"When I told him about the new carving I couldn't keep him away, he was so excited."

Garth scowled. "I didn't want anyone else to see it yet, Nikki."

She went up to him, looked appealingly into his eyes. "Please don't be angry, Allan. It means so much to him."

"All right. Send him up. But will you come again tomorrow?"

Her eyes became tender and she touched his cheek with her hand. "I'll try to come sometime this week."

"I want a kiss," he said. "And none of your sisterly, split-second pecks."

Nikki let herself be kissed and, when released, stuck out her tongue at him. "You're a naughty genius, Mr. Garth. But a nice one."

Almost before he knew it, she was gone, with a blown kiss, a smile and a wave.

What a wondrous little being, Garth thought as he paced the floor. How had such a fellow as Lepescu ever fathered her? Her mother, now dead, must have been a rare and lovely woman.

Lepescu. From somewhere in Central Europe he had come; his accent, now blurred, was difficult to identify, and he was guarded about his origins. Garth was sure he had not begun life with his present fortune, not that it mattered; but the man had an unctuous, disturbing quality that, he was sure, was replaced when he dealt with subordinates.

Lepescu's knock ended his reverie and then the man was in the room. He extended his manicured hand and bowed slightly from the waist, and Garth noticed that his suit—although obviously from one of the best tailors—was too tight over his compact frame. Also, that Lepescu's curly gray hair was still slicked down with something too oily and fragrant.

"Maestro," Lepescu said. "You do not know what this means to me. When Nikki told me—" He waggled an arch forefinger. "Why did you

not tell old Lepescu? One of your staunchest, and earliest, supporters." The glittering black eyes darted around the studio and the waxed moustache bristled with excitement. Then Lepescu saw the ebony carving and pattered over to it, making little sounds of delight in his throat and rubbing his hands together.

"Oh, Maestro. Magnificent. Magnificent!"

Garth studied the goddess, almost unaware of the little man's effusions. She *was* his masterpiece. When Lepescu's words again impinged on his mind he was saying: "I have eight Garths, but this makes them look like the work of an amateur." Lepescu smiled silkily and bowed. "Not, I hasten to add, that you as an amateur do not tower above your professional contemporaries.

"But this! This is to Garth what 'The Thinker' was to Rodin, what 'Kneeling Woman' was to Lehmbruck. I must have it."

Garth smiled grimly. "Not this one."

"But Maestro! I'll pay anything."

"All your money can't buy this one, Lepescu. This one is my passport to immortality. I'm going to have a one-man show with this as the *pièce de resistance*, then exhibit it here and abroad and finally give it—give it—to one of the world's finest museums."

Lepescu wrung his hands in frustration and chagrin. "But you don't know what this means to me. With it, I'd have one of the greatest collections. Think what it would do for me."

"You don't know what it means to *me*. No, not this time, I wouldn't even have shown it to you except for Nikki."

Lepescu regarded him with wily appraisal, finally spoke, his tone tinged with victory. "I think you will let me have the carving."

Garth eyed him, half with hostility, half with amusement. "Do you, now?"

"Yes. This inanimate woman of exquisite ugliness in return for an animate woman of exquisite loveliness."

Garth scowled. "What are you talking about?"

"My Nikki." He used a proprietary intonation on "my."

"Nikki!"

"Yes. I am an American now but, as you undoubtedly know, I came from a European country where the father's word is law. I have given Nikki every advantage and every freedom, but in a situation such as this she would respect and obey my wishes."

"You mean you'd *sell* Nikki for my carving?"

"My dear Mr. Garth. Americans are such children. And, if you will



permit me, great artists are even smaller children. This is not a sale. Nikki's hand in marriage would make you very happy. It would not be a sacrifice for Nikki. She is very devoted to you. She likes and admires you. You could nurture those emotions into love, I am sure. And I would be most elated by such a union. I think you are a great man and I would be proud to be connected to you by more than my cancelled checks."

Garth stared unseeingly ahead, stunned by the proposal and, at the same time, thrilled by it. It wouldn't be taking unfair advantage of Nikki, not really. It would just be helping her to make up a mind still too immature for such vital decisions. And he was certain he could make her happy.

"Does my offer interest you?" Lepescu prodded.

"What would happen to my carving? You'd bury it in your house with the rest of your collection?"

Lepescu pondered, then rubbed his hands. "You could have your one-man show. Then for the next, say, three years, you could decide when and where it would be exhibited. And, on my death, I would will it to a fine museum. Could anything be fairer?"

"It's a compelling offer, Lepescu."

"My hand on it."

Garth ignored the hand and regarded the baleful face of the goddess. At last he spoke. "But my statue is not completed yet."

Lepescu fairly danced with excitement. "No! No! Please do not lay another finger on it. It is perfection as it is. Not another stroke, Maestro, I beseech you. You cannot improve on perfection."

"What I have to do has nothing to do with the exterior of the statue."

"I do not understand."

"There are more things 'twixt—" Garth said, almost to himself. Then he eyed Lepescu. "You do not have to understand."

The little man shrugged. "As you say. But we have made a bargain?" He extended his hand again and Garth took it.

"We have made a bargain." He studied the gleaming ebony and garnet eyes. "I hope neither of us has occasion to regret it."

After Lepescu had left, Garth poured himself half a water-glass full of brandy and stood silently before the carving for many minutes. At last he lifted the glass in salute. Into his mind came, irrelevantly, it seemed, an old Arabic proverb: "On ebony and ivory the same dark doom is writ." He drank and smashed the glass.

Garth placed an ottoman directly before the goddess and sat looking

into her evil face. "You are my greatest achievement, Goddess of Men's Souls," he whispered. "And I am giving you into the hands of strangers, because I am mortal, weak. But I have poured so much of myself into your creation that we shall always have an affinity. And, before I surrender you, I wish to give you a final gift—a living part of my mind or spirit."

Through the night-hours Garth sat before the black figure, straining with all of his being to project an iota of his consciousness into its core. As the hours dragged by and his muscles became cramped and his mind wearied he stimulated himself with gulps from the bottle. At times doubts assailed him. Was what he was trying to do utterly impossible? Was he a fool? A fanatic? A madman? Had his exposure to weird rites in many lands unbalanced him?

Garth banished the doubts, then they returned, and he fought them down again. In the small, silent hours, when he was nearly exhausted and ready to give up, he became aware of an almost *tangible* flow of his brain waves into the soulless carving. Then, with a thrill of horror, he felt that his thoughts were meeting receptivity in the wood, imparting to it a primitive sort of consciousness, setting up a counter-reaction in which he felt a flow of something *from* the statue to him. Was this self-hypnotism? Insanity? Or just exhaustion. The flow became stronger and Garth found himself unable to look away.

When dawn's fingers brushed night out of the studio, Garth was slumped within the encircling arms of the goddess, his eyes clouded with the film of death. Her eyes glowed with a malignant luminosity that could not have been provided by mere garnets. ●

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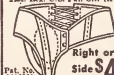
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# BOURBON ON A CHAMPAGNE CARPET

by Albert Bermel

**ARNOLD PALEY** jumped for the foot of the fire escape and his hands took possession of the second rung. He hauled his chest level with them, flickered his elbows and pushed. In five energetic seconds he was on the first landing. The weekend canvas bag tied around his neck joggled uncomfortably. He took it off, and scuttled up two more flights, until he was above the level of the street lamp.

Fourth floor; two more to go. He went. 85th Street was quiet, but he could see and hear the traffic on Lexington and on Park. He put his bag down and tried the window. Firm. He played his rubber-encased flashlight very close to the frames, and found they were held together by a brass burglar-proof bolt and a lock. Careful people, Jill's parents.

From the pocket of his windbreaker he took a narrow-bladed saw, clicked the handle into place and edged it between the frames. The sawing of steel on brass sang out, and he stopped and started again, more slowly. It took him over a minute to slice through the bolt. The lock was more difficult; it was steel. He had to stop once, because his forearm ached from the pressure. There was plenty of time, he knew, but he wanted to get inside.

Arnold Paley sawed wildly, not caring about the noise. There was a

*twang*, and the lower frame of the window pushed up without a protest. He got in and closed it behind him. As he stepped forward, he had a second of white fear that he had broken into the wrong apartment. But his flashlight revealed the champagne-colored carpet and the bed and night-table and lamps, and he recognized the shapes and the way they were disposed about the room.

He had cased the apartment where Jill lived with her parents when he'd been there for dinner four nights before, following Jill through the two bedrooms and living room. He complimented every painting and sculpture he could see ("Hey, that's great . . . I like this green one here . . . I bet that stone woman cost plenty . . .") to take her attention off his scrutiny of the glass cabinet of sterling, a heavy gold table lighter, a gold cigar case and personal jewelry scattered about.

"That's a Kandinski original," Jill said. "That one's a Fragonard; a good print, but a print. These drawings are by Rowlanson, of course, and that green one, as you call it (you're so quaint, Army), that happens to be a very fine reproduction of a Constable. But they're nothing. I don't want to brag, but wait till you come up to the house in Connecticut, Army. We have some beauties there."

"Yes," Arnold Paley said, "I'm looking forward to the house in Connecticut. There must be a lot to see . . ."

She was a pretty girl of twenty-one, four years his junior, and Arnold Paley hoped to go a great deal farther with her than he had done up to now. He had met her at a party at Gerry Tatlock's, and they had been out seven times, always to the theater, which Arnold Paley did not relish, and always to see something "serious and worthwhile, which other boys don't seem to understand," like Webster or Racine or Ionesco. Then she would talk at him for an hour or so in some coffee shop in the Village and drink *cappuccini* and tell him, "I'm so lucky you like good drama, Army," while Arnold Paley was trying to figure out how long his savings account could go on taking this kind of a beating.

And she would let him see her to the apartment door, and they would peck each other goodnight, and Arnold Paley would be so exhilarated that he probably wouldn't notice the doorman salute him on the way out. . . .

He put the canvas bag on the champagne-colored carpeting. Inside the glass cabinet in the living room was the four-tiered box of ebony-

handled sterling. He gathered it up, wrapping each tier in a tarnish-resistant felt covering and then placing it in the canvas bag (what he lacked in experience he could make up for in care) . . . soup spoons and espresso spoons, butter knives and meat knives, fish forks and cake forks.

He was annoyed to find that he was hurrying. Jill had said she was taking her parents to a musical, and wouldn't be home for another two, two-and-a-half hours. The ebony handles felt moist through his thin gloves. Arnold Paley would have liked to help himself to a couple of the pictures, especially the green one. What the hell—everything here was insured. Must be. But he wasn't sure how he could dispose of them. They were too big for the bag. He moved into one of the bedrooms.

In a dresser drawer he found the heavy gold lighter and a bundle of ten-dollar bills: \$180 when he counted them. That more than made up for the gold cigar case which was missing—Jill's father must have taken it out with him. He rummaged through another compartment of the same drawer and found a man's jewelry box in yellow leather. Cuff links, tie clasps, a pearl tie pin, a gold wrist watch without straps and a cigar cutter—silver, maybe. Good.

He pulled out the second drawer in the dresser, and was about to explore Jill's mother's jewelry—he could see a pearl necklace, at least—when a key scraped and rattled into the hallway lock.

What the hell? They must have missed the performance. Or changed their minds. Arnold Paley refused to panic, but he got across to the window fast and pulled it up, holding the canvas bag in one hand. He heard Jill laughing, and her father saying something funny. The talk and laughter suddenly amplified as the hallway door opened.

He was half-in, half-out the window, straddling the sill, when he realized that the man was not Jill's father. The light went on in the living room and threw a faint yellow triangle inside the doorway.

The man's voice mumbled again—it was a Joe College kind of voice—confident and unmodulated, with wide a's and o's. Arnold Paley lowered his left foot to the ground and took the weight off his backside. He heard glasses jangle in the kitchen, and the Joe College voice said "Bourbon," and then, "*A votre santé, skal, prosit, gesundheit, salute!*" and Jill snickered like it was funny or original. Or like the Joe College had pinched her or something.

Arnold Paley's pride told him to go into the kitchen and knock every grinning tooth out of the Joe College head. His prudence told him to scam and feel lucky: he could spend tonight's proceeds on two, maybe three, new suits and plenty left over, not on that goddam, ungrateful bitch . . . and here his pride took over again: he would like her to know, though, who had burglarized her home, to think that he'd done it out of spite.

But he heard her say distinctly, "Let's take our drinks in the bedroom, and be cozy," and he knew he could not face her. Bitter and heartsick and unnerved, Arnold Paley clutched his weekend canvas bag and swung his leg out over the sill. He reached for the fire escape. It was eight feet away.

And in his last, falling moments, Arnold Paley was still reaching for it, and remembering that it was outside the other bedroom, the bedroom by which he had entered the apartment, Jill's bedroom.

Jill stood at the doorway of her bedroom to let her guest approve the pink sheets, the headboard, the resilient mattress—when a cry came from outside, like a broken note on an oboe. She heard a kind of thud, small, and shouting below.

"Pardon me," the Joe College said, "that made me jump. I spilled bourbon all over your beautiful carpet."

●



**A FEAR CLASSIC:**

# **HOW LOVE CAME TO PROFESSOR GILDEA**

**by Robert Hichens**

## **I**

**D**ull people often wondered how it came about that Father Murchison and Professor Frederic Gildea were intimate friends. The one was all faith, the other all scepticism. The nature of the Father was based on love. He viewed the world with an almost childlike tenderness above his long, black cassock; and his mild, yet perfectly fearless, blue eyes seemed always to be watching the goodness that exists in humanity, and rejoicing at what they saw. The Professor, on the other hand, had a hard face like a hatchet, tipped with an aggressive black goatee beard. His eyes were quick, piercing and irreverent. The lines about his small, thin-lipped mouth were almost cruel. His voice was harsh and dry, sometimes, when he grew energetic, almost soprano. It fired off words with a sharp and clipping utterance. His habitual manner was one of distrust and investigation. It was impossible to suppose that, in his busy life, he found any time for love, either of humanity in general or of an individual.

Yet his days were spent in scientific investigations which conferred immense benefits upon the world.

Both men were celibates. Father Murchison was a member of an Anglican order which forbade him to marry. Professor Gildea had a poor opinion of most things, but especially of women. He had formerly held a post as lecturer at Birmingham. But when his fame as a discoverer grew, he removed to London. There, at a lecture he gave in the East End, he first met Father Murchison. They spoke a few words. Perhaps the bright intelligence of the priest appealed to the man of science, who was inclined, as a rule, to regard the clergy with some contempt. Perhaps the transparent sincerity of this devotee, full of common sense, attracted him. As he was leaving the hall he abruptly asked the Father to call on him at his house in Hyde Park Place. And the Father, who seldom went into the West End, except to preach, accepted the invitation.

"When will you come?" said Gildea.

He was folding up the blue paper on which his notes were written in a tiny, clear hand. The leaves rustled drily in accompaniment to his sharp, dry voice.

"On Sunday week I am preaching in the evening at St. Saviour's, not far off," said the Father.

"I don't go to church."

"No," said the Father, without any accent of surprise or condemnation.

"Come to supper afterwards?"

"Thank you. I will."

"What time will you come?"

The Father smiled.

"As soon as I have finished my sermon. The service is at six-thirty."

"About eight then, I suppose. Don't make the sermon too long. My number in Hyde Park Place is one hundred. Good-night to you."

He snapped an elastic band round his papers and strode off without shaking hands.

On the appointed Sunday, Father Murchison preached to a densely crowded congregation at St. Saviour's. The subject of his sermon was sympathy, and the comparative uselessness of man in the world unless he can learn to love his neighbour as himself. The sermon was rather long, and when the preacher, in his flowing, black cloak, and his hard,



round hat, with a straight brim over which hung the ends of a black cord, made his way towards the Professor's house, the hands of the illuminated clock disc at the Marble Arch pointed to twenty minutes past eight.

The Father hurried on, pushing his way through the crowd of standing soldiers, chattering women and giggling street boys in their Sunday best. It was a warm April night, and, when he reached number 100, Hyde Park Place, he found the Professor bareheaded on his doorstep, gazing out towards the Park railings, and enjoying the soft, moist air, in front of his lighted passage.

"Ha, a long sermon!" he exclaimed. "Come in."

"I fear it was," said the Father, obeying the invitation. "I am that dangerous thing—an extempore preacher."

"More attractive to speak without notes, if you can do it. Hang your hat and coat—oh, cloak—here. We'll have supper at once. This is the dining-room."

He opened a door on the right and they entered a long, narrow room, with a gold paper and a black ceiling, from which hung an electric lamp with a gold-coloured shade. In the room stood a small oval table with covers laid for two. The Professor rang the bell. Then he said:

"People seem to talk better at an oval table than at a square one."

"Really. Is that so?"

"Well, I've had precisely the same party twice, once at a square table, once at an oval table. The first dinner was a dull failure, the second a brilliant success. Sit down, won't you?"

"How d'you account for the difference?" said the Father, sitting down, and pulling the tail of his cassock well under him.

"H'm. I know how you'd account for it."

"Indeed. How then?"

"At an oval table, since there are no corners, the chain of human sympathy—the electric current, is much more complete. Eh! Let me give you some soup."

"Thank you."

The Father took it, and, as he did so, turned his beaming blue eyes on his host. Then he smiled.

"What!" he said, in his pleasant, light tenor voice. "You do go to church sometimes, then?"

"To-night is the first time for ages. And, mind you, I was tremendously bored."

The Father still smiled, and his blue eyes gently twinkled.

"Dear, dear!" he said, "what a pity!"

"But not by the sermon," Guildea added. "I don't pay a compliment. I state a fact. The sermon didn't bore me. If it had, I should have said so, or said nothing."

"And which would you have done?"

The Professor smiled almost genially.

"Don't know," he said. "What wine d'you drink?"

"None, thank you. I'm a teetotaller. In my profession and *milieu* it is necessary to be one. Yes, I will have some soda water. I think you would have done the first."

"Very likely, and very wrongly. You wouldn't have minded much."

"I don't think I should."

They were intimate already. The Father felt most pleasantly at home under the black ceiling. He drank some soda water and seemed to enjoy it more than the Professor enjoyed his claret.

"You smile at the theory of the chain of human sympathy, I see," said the Father. "Then what is your explanation of the failure of your square party with corners, the success of your oval party without them?"

"Probably on the first occasion the wit of the assembly had a chill on his liver, while on the second he was in perfect health. Yet, you see, I stick to the oval table."

"And that means——"

"Very little. By the way, your omission of any allusion to the notorious part liver plays in love was a serious one to-night."

"Your omission of any desire for close human sympathy in your life is a more serious one."

"How can you be sure I have no such desire?"

"I divine it. Your look, your manner, tell me it is so. You were disagreeing with my sermon all the time I was preaching. Weren't you?"

"Part of the time."

The servant changed the plates. He was a middle-aged, blond, thin man, with a stony white face, pale, prominent eyes, and an accomplished manner of service. When he had left the room the Professor continued.

"Your remarks interested me, but I thought them exaggerated."

"For instance?"

"Let me play the egoist for a moment. I spend most of my time in hard work, very hard work. The results of this work, you will allow, benefit humanity."

"Enormously," assented the Father, thinking of more than one of Guldea's discoveries.

"And the benefit conferred by this work, undertaken merely for its own sake, is just as great as if it were undertaken because I loved my fellow man, and sentimentally desired to see him more comfortable than he is at present. I'm as useful precisely in my present condition of—in my present non-affectional condition—as I should be if I were as full of gush as the sentimentalists who want to get murderers out of prison, or to put a premium on tyranny—like Tolstoi—by preventing the punishment of tryants."

"One may do great harm with affection; great good without it. Yes, that is true. Even *le bon motif* is not everything, I know. Still I contend that, given your powers, you would be far more useful in the world with sympathy, affection for your kind, added to them than as you are. I believe even that you would do still more splendid work."

The Professor poured himself out another glass of claret.

"You noticed my butler?" he said.

"I did."

"He's a perfect servant. He makes me perfectly comfortable. Yet he has no feeling of liking for me. I treat him civilly. I pay him well. But I never think about him, or concern myself with him as a human being. I know nothing of his character except what I read of it in his last master's letter. There are, you may say, no truly human relations between us. You would affirm that his work would be better done if I had made him personally like me as man—of any class—can like man—of any other class?"

"I should, decidedly."

"I contend that he couldn't do his work better than he does it at present."

"But if any crisis occurred?"

"What?"

"Any crisis, change in your condition. If you needed his help, not only as a man and a butler, but as a man and a brother? He'd fail you

then, probably. You would never get from your servant that finest service which can only be prompted by an honest affection."

"You have finished?"

"Quite."

"Let us go upstairs then. Yes, those are good prints. I picked them up in Birmingham when I was living there. This is my workroom."

They came to a double room lined entirely with books, and brilliantly, rather hardly, lit by electricity. The windows at one end looked on to the Park, at the other on to the garden of a neighbouring house. The door by which they entered was concealed from the inner and smaller room by the jutting wall of the outer room, in which stood a huge writing-table loaded with letters, pamphlets and manuscripts. Between the two windows of the inner room was a cage in which a large, grey parrot was clambering, using both beak and claws to assist him in his slow and meditative peregrinations.

"You have a pet," said the Father, surprised.

"I possess a parrot," the Professor answered drily, "I got him for a purpose when I was making a study of the imitative powers of birds, and I have never got rid of him. A cigar?"

"Thank you."

They sat down. Father Murchison glanced at the parrot. It had paused in its journey, and, clinging to the bars of its cage, was regarding them with attentive round eyes that looked deliberately intelligent, but by no means sympathetic. He looked away from it to Gildea, who was smoking, with his head thrown back, his sharp, pointed chin, on which the small black beard bristled, upturned. He was moving his under lip up and down rapidly. This action caused the beard to stir and look peculiarly aggressive. The Father suddenly chuckled softly.

"Why's that?" cried Gildea, letting his chin drop down on his breast and looking at his guest sharply.

"I was thinking it would have to be a crisis indeed that could make you cling to your butler's affection for assistance."

Gildea smiled too.

"You're right. It would. Here he comes."

The man entered with coffee. He offered it gently, and retired like a shadow retreating on a wall.

"Splendid, inhuman fellow," remarked Gildea.

"I prefer the East End lad who does my errands in Bird Street," said the Father. "I know all his worries. He knows some of mine. We are friends. He's more noisy than your man. He even breathes hard when he is specially solicitous, but he would do more for me than put the coals on my fire, or black my square-toed boots."

"Men are differently made. To me the watchful eye of affection would be abominable."

"What about that bird?"

The Father pointed to the parrot. It had got up on its perch and, with one foot uplifted in an impressive, almost benedictory, manner, was gazing steadily at the Professor.

"That's the watchful eye of imitation, with a mind at the back of it, desirous of reproducing the peculiarities of others. No, I thought your sermon to-night very fresh, very clever. But I have no wish for affection. Reasonable liking, of course, one desires"—he tugged sharply at his beard, as if to warn himself against sentimentality—"but anything more would be most irksome, and would push me, I feel sure, towards cruelty. It would also hamper one's work."

"I don't think so."

"The sort of work I do. I shall continue to benefit the world without loving it, and it will continue to accept the benefits without loving me. That's all as it should be."

He drank his coffee. Then he added rather aggressively:

"I have neither time nor inclination for sentimentality."

When Guildea let Father Murchison out, he followed the Father on to the doorstep and stood there for a moment. The Father glanced across the damp road into the Park.

"I see you've got a gate just opposite you," he said idly.

"Yes. I often slip across for a stroll to clear my brain. Goodnight to you. Come again some day."

"With pleasure. Good-night."

The Priest strode away, leaving Guildea standing on the step.

Father Murchison came many times again to number one hundred Hyde Park Place. He had a feeling of liking for most men and women whom he knew, and of tenderness for all, whether he knew them or not, but he grew to have a special sentiment towards Guildea. Strangely enough, it was a sentiment of pity. He pitied this hard-working, emi-

nently successful man of big brain and bold heart, who never seemed depressed, who never wanted assistance, who never complained of the twisted skein of life or faltered in his progress along its way. The Father pitied Guildea, in fact, because Guildea wanted so little. He had told him so, for the intercourse of the two men, from the beginning, had been singularly frank.

One evening, when they were talking together, the Father happened to speak of one of the oddities of life, the fact that those who do not want things often get them, while those who seek them vehemently are disappointed in their search.

"Then I ought to have affection poured upon me," said Guildea smiling rather grimly. "For I hate it."

"Perhaps some day you will."

"I hope not, most sincerely."

Father Murchison said nothing for a moment. He was drawing together the ends of the broad band round his cassock. When he spoke he seemed to be answering someone.

"Yes," he said slowly, "yes, that *is* my feeling—pity."

"For whom?" said the Professor.

Then, suddenly, he understood. He did not say that he understood, but Father Murchison felt, and saw, that it was quite unnecessary to answer his friend's question. So Guildea, strangely enough, found himself closely acquainted with a man—his opposite in all ways—who pitied him.

The fact that he did not mind this, and scarcely ever thought about it, shows perhaps as clearly as anything could, the peculiar indifference of his nature.

## II

One Autumn evening, a year and a half after Father Murchison and the Professor had first met, the Father called in Hyde Park Place and enquired of the blond and stony butler—his name was Pitting—whether his master was at home.

"Yes, sir," replied Pitting. "Will you please come this way?"

He moved noiselessly up the rather narrow stairs, followed by the Father, tenderly opened the library door, and in his soft, cold voice,

announced:

"Father Murchison."

Guildea was sitting in an armchair, before a small fire. His thin, long-fingered hands lay outstretched upon his knees, his head was sunk down on his chest. He appeared to be pondering deeply. Pitting very slightly raised his voice.

"Father Murchison to see you, sir," he repeated.

The Professor jumped up rather suddenly and turned sharply round as the Father came in.

"Oh," he said. "It's you, is it? Glad to see you. Come to the fire."

The Father glanced at him and thought him looking unusually fatigued.

"You don't look well to-night," the Father said.

"No?"

"You must be working too hard. That lecture you are going to give in Paris is bothering you?"

"Not a bit. It's all arranged. I could deliver it to you at this moment verbatim. Well, sit down."

The Father did so, and Guildea sank once more into his chair and stared hard into the fire without another word. He seemed to be thinking profoundly. His friend did not interrupt him, but quietly lit a pipe and began to smoke reflectively. The eyes of Guildea were fixed upon the fire. The Father glanced about the room, at the walls of soberly bound books, at the crowded writing-table, at the windows, before which hung heavy, dark-blue curtains of old brocade, at the cage, which stood between them. A green baize covering was thrown over it. The Father wondered why. He had never seen Napoleon—so the parrot was named—covered up at night before. While he was looking at the baize Guildea suddenly jerked up his head, and, taking his hands from his knees and clasping them, said abruptly:

"D'you think I'm an attractive man?"

Father Murchison jumped. Such a question coming from such a man astounded him.

"Bless me!" he ejaculated. "What makes you ask? Do you mean attractive to the opposite sex?"

"That's what I don't know," said the Professor gloomily, and staring again into the fire. "That's what I don't know."

The Father grew more astonished.

"Don't know!" he exclaimed.

And he laid down his pipe.

"Let's say—d'you think I'm attractive, that there's anything about me which might draw a—a human being, or an animal, irresistibly to me?"

"Whether you desired it or not?"

"Exactly—or—no, let us say definitely—if I did not desire it."

Father Murchison pursed up his rather full, cherubic lips, and little wrinkles appeared about the corners of his blue eyes.

"There might be, of course," he said, after a pause. "Human nature is weak, engagingly weak, Guildea. And you're inclined to flout it. I could understand a certain class of lady—the lion-hunting, the intellectual lady, seeking you. Your reputation, your great name——"

"Yes, yes," Guildea interrupted, rather irritably—"I know all that, I know."

He twisted his long hands together, bending the palms outwards till his thin, pointed fingers cracked. His forehead was wrinkled in a frown.

"I imagine," he said—he stopped and coughed drily, almost shrilly—"I imagine it would be very disagreeable to be liked, to be run after—that is the usual expression, isn't it—by anything one objected to."

And now he half turned in his chair, crossed his legs one over the other, and looked at his guest with an unusual, almost piercing interrogation.

"Anything?" said the Father.

"Well—well, anyone. I imagine nothing could be more unpleasant."

"To you—no," answered the Father. "But—forgive me Guildea, I cannot conceive you permitting such intrusion. You don't encourage adoration."

Guildea nodded his head gloomily.

"I don't," he said, "I don't. That's just it. That's the curious part of it, that I——"

He broke off deliberately, got up and stretched.

"I'll have a pipe, too," he said.

He went over to the mantelpiece, got his pipe, filled it and lighted it. As he held the match to the tobacco, bending forward with an enquiring expression, his eyes fell upon the green baize that covered Napoleon's



cage. He threw the match into the grate, and puffed at the pipe as he walked forward to the cage. When he reached it he put out his hand, took hold of the baize and began to pull it away. Then suddenly he pushed it back over the cage.

"No," he said, as if to himself, "no."

He returned rather hastily to the fire and threw himself once more into his armchair.

"You're wondering," he said to Father Murchison. "So am I. I don't know at all what to make of it. I'll just tell you the facts and you must tell me what you think of them. The night before last, after a day of hard work—but no harder than usual—I went to the front door to get a breath of air. You know I often do that."

"Yes, I found you on the doorstep when I first came here."

"Just so. I didn't put on hat or coat. I just stood on the step as I was. My mind, I remember, was still full of my work. It was rather a dark night, not very dark. The hour was about eleven, or a quarter past. I was staring at the Park, and presently I found that my eyes were directed towards somebody who was sitting, back to me, on one of the benches. I saw the person—if it was a person—through the railings."

"If it was a person!" said the Father. "What do you mean by that?"

"Wait a minute. I say that because it was too dark for me to know. I merely saw some blackish object on the bench, rising into view above the level of the back of the seat. I couldn't say it was man, woman or child. But something there was, and I found that I was looking at it."

"I understand."

"Gradually, I also found that my thoughts were becoming fixed upon this thing or person. I began to wonder, first, what it was doing there; next, what it was thinking; lastly, what it was like."

"Some poor creature without a home, I suppose," said the Father.

"I said that to myself. Still, I was taken with an extraordinary interest about this object, so great an interest that I got my hat and crossed the road to go into the Park. As you know, there's an entrance almost opposite to my house. Well, Murchison, I crossed the road, passed through the gate in the railings, went up to the seat, and found that there was—nothing on it."

"Were you looking at it as you walked?"

"Part of the time. But I removed my eyes from it just as I passed

through the gate, because there was a row going on a little way off, and I turned for an instant in that direction. When I saw that the seat was vacant I was seized by a most absurd sensation of disappointment, almost of anger. I stopped and looked about me to see if anything was moving away, but I could see nothing. It was a cold night and misty, and there were few people about. Feeling, as I say, foolishly and unnaturally disappointed, I retraced my steps to this house. When I got here I discovered that during my short absence I had left the hall door open—half open."

"Rather imprudent in London."

"Yes. I had no idea, of course, that I had done so, till I got back. However, I was only away three minutes or so."

"Yes."

"It was not likely that anybody had gone in."

"I suppose not."

"Was it?"

"Why do you ask me that, Guildea?"

"Well, well!"

"Besides, if anybody had gone in, on your return you'd have caught him, surely."

Gildea coughed again. The Father, surprised, could not fail to recognise that he was nervous and that his nervousness was affecting him physically.

"I must have caught cold that night," he said, as if he had read his friend's thought and hastened to contradict it. Then he went on:

"I entered the hall, or passage, rather."

He paused again. His uneasiness was becoming very apparent.

"And you did catch somebody?" said the Father.

Gildea cleared his throat.

"That's just it," he said, "now we come to it. I'm not imaginative, as you know."

"You certainly are not."

"No, but hardly had I stepped into the passage before I felt certain that somebody had got into the house during my absence. I felt convinced of it, and not only that, I also felt convinced that the intruder was the very person I had dimly seen sitting upon the seat in the Park. What d'you say to that?"

"I begin to think you are imaginative."

"H'm! It seemed to me that the person—the occupant of the seat—and I, had simultaneously formed the project of interviewing each other, had simultaneously set out to put that project into execution. I became so certain of this that I walked hastily upstairs into this room, expecting to find the visitor awaiting me. But there was no one. I then came down again and went into the dining-room. No one. I was actually astonished. Isn't that odd?"

"Very," said the Father, quite gravely.

The Professor's chill and gloomy manner, and uncomfortable, constrained appearance kept away the humour that might well have lurked round the steps of such a discourse.

"I went upstairs again," he continued, "sat down and thought the matter over. I resolved to forget it, and took up a book. I might perhaps have been able to read, but suddenly I thought I noticed——"

He stopped abruptly. Father Murchison observed that he was staring towards the green baize that covered the parrot's cage.

"But that's nothing," he said. "Enough that I couldn't read. I resolved to explore the house. You know how small it is, how easily one can go all over it. I went all over it. I went into every room without exception. To the servants, who were having supper, I made some excuse. They were surprised at my advent, no doubt."

"And Pitting?"

"Oh, he got up politely when I came in, stood while I was there, but never said a word. I muttered 'don't disturb yourselves,' or something of the sort, and came out. Murchison, I found nobody new in the house—yet I returned to this room entirely convinced that somebody had entered while I was in the Park."

"And gone out again before you came back?"

"No, had stayed, and was still in the house."

"But, my dear Guildea," began the Father, now in great astonishment. "Surely——"

"I know what you want to say—what I should want to say in your place. Now, do wait. I am also convinced that this visitor has not left the house and is at this moment in it."

He spoke with evident sincerity, with extreme gravity. Father Murchison looked him full in the face, and met his quick keen eyes.

"No," he said, as if in reply to an uttered question: "I'm perfectly sane, I assure you. The whole matter seems almost as incredible to me as it must to you. But, as you know, I never quarrel with facts, however strange. I merely try to examine into them thoroughly. I have already consulted a doctor and been pronounced in perfect bodily health.

He paused, as if expecting the Father to say something.

"Go on, Guildea," he said, "you haven't finished."

"No. I felt that night positive that somebody had entered the house, and remained in it, and my conviction grew. I went to bed as usual, and, contrary to my expectation, slept as well as I generally do. Yet directly I woke up yesterday morning I knew that my household had been increased by one."

"May I interrupt you for one moment? How did you know it?"

"By my mental sensation. I can only say that I was perfectly conscious of a new presence within my house, close to me."

"How very strange," said the Father. "And you feel absolutely certain that you are not overworked? Your brain does not feel tired? Your head is quite clear?"

"Quite. I was never better. When I came down to breakfast that morning I looked sharply into Pitting's face. He was as coldly placid and inexpressive as usual. It was evident to me that his mind was in no way distressed. After breakfast I sat down to work, all the time ceaselessly conscious of the fact of this intruder upon my privacy. Nevertheless, I laboured for several hours, waiting for any development that might occur to clear away the mysterious obscurity of this event. I lunched. About half-past two I was obliged to go out to attend a lecture. I therefore took my coat and hat, opened my door, and stepped on to the pavement. I was instantly aware that I was no longer intruded upon, and this although I was now in the street, surrounded by people. Consequently, I felt certain that the thing in my house must be thinking of me, perhaps even spying upon me."

"Wait a moment," interrupted the Father. "What was your sensation? Was it one of fear?"

"Oh, dear no. I was entirely puzzled—as I am now—and keenly interested, but not in any way alarmed. I delivered my lecture with my usual ease and returned home in the evening. On entering the house again I was perfectly conscious that the intruder was still there. Last

night I dined alone and spent the hours after dinner in reading a scientific work in which I was deeply interested. While I read, however, I never for one moment lost the knowledge that some mind—very attentive to me—was within hail of mine. I will say more than this—the sensation constantly increased, and, by the time I got up to go to bed, I had come to a very strange conclusion.”

“What? What was it?”

“That whoever—or whatever—had entered my house during my short absence in the Park was more than interested in me.”

“More than interested in you?”

“Was fond, or was becoming fond, of me.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the Father. “Now I understand why you asked me just now whether I thought there was anything about you that might draw a human being or an animal irresistibly to you.”

“Precisely. Since I came to this conclusion. Murchison, I will confess that my feeling of strong curiosity has become tinged with another feeling.”

“Of fear?”

“No, of dislike, of irritation. No—not fear, not fear.”

As Guildenstern repeated unnecessarily this asseveration he looked again towards the parrot’s cage.

“What is there to be afraid of in such a matter?” he added. “I’m not a child to tremble before bogies.”

In saying the last words he raised his voice sharply; then he walked quickly to the cage, and, with an abrupt movement, pulled the baize covering from it. Napoleon was disclosed, apparently dozing upon his perch with his head held slightly on one side. As the light reached him, he moved, ruffled the feathers about his neck, blinked his eyes, and began slowly to sidle to and fro, thrusting his head forward and drawing it back with an air of complacent, though rather unmeaning, energy. Guildenstern stood by the cage, looking at him closely, and indeed with an attention that was so intense as to be remarkable, almost unnatural.

“How absurd these birds are!” he said at length, coming back to the fire.

“You have no more to tell me?” asked the Father.

“No. I am still aware of the presence of something in my house. I am still conscious of its close attention to me. I am still irritated, seriously

annoyed—I confess it—by that attention.”

“You say you are aware of the presence of something at this moment?”

“At this moment—yes.”

“Do you mean in this room, with us, now?”

“I should say so—at any rate, quite near us.”

Again he glanced quickly, almost suspiciously, towards the cage of the parrot. The bird was sitting still on its perch now. Its head was bent down and cocked sideways, and it appeared to be listening attentively to something.

“That bird will have the intonations of my voice more correctly than ever by to-morrow morning,” said the Father, watching Gildea closely with his mild blue eyes. “And it has always imitated me very cleverly.”

The Professor started slightly.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, no doubt. Well, what do you make of this affair?”

“Nothing at all. It is absolutely inexplicable. I can speak quite frankly to you, I feel sure.”

“Of course. That’s why I have told you the whole thing.”

“I think you must be over-worked, over-strained, without knowing it.”

“And that the doctor was mistaken when he said I was all right?”

“Yes.”

Gildea knocked his pipe out against the chimney piece.

“It may be so,” he said, “I will not be so unreasonable as to deny the possibility, although I feel as well as I ever did in my life. What do you advise then?”

“A week of complete rest away from London, in good air.”

“The usual prescription. I’ll take it. I’ll go to-morrow to Westgate and leave Napoleon to keep house in my absence.”

For some reason, which he could not explain to himself, the pleasure which Father Murchison felt in hearing the first part of his friend’s final remark was lessened, was almost destroyed, by the last sentence.

He walked towards the City that night, deep in thought, remembering and carefully considering the first interview he had with Gildea in the latter’s house a year and a half before.

On the following morning Gildea left London.

Father Murchison was so busy a man that he had little time for brooding over the affairs of others. During Guildea's week at the sea, however, the Father thought about him a great deal, with much wonder and some dismay. The dismay was soon banished, for the mild-eyed priest was quick to discern weakness in himself, quicker still to drive it forth as a most undesirable inmate of the soul. But the wonder remained. It was destined to a crescendo. Guildea had left London on a Thursday. On a Thursday he returned, having previously sent a note to Father Murchison to mention that he was leaving Westgate at a certain time. When his train ran into Victoria Station, at five o'clock in the evening, he was surprised to see the cloaked figure of his friend standing upon the grey platform behind a line of porters.

"What, Murchison!" he said. "You here! Have you seceded from your order that you are taking this holiday?"

They shook hands.

"No," said the Father. "It happened that I had to be in this neighbourhood to-day, visiting a sick person. So I thought I would meet you."

"And see if I were still a sick person, eh?"

The Professor glanced at him kindly, but with a dry little laugh.

"Are you?" replied the Father gently, looking at him with interest.

"No, I think not. You appear very well."

The sea air had, in fact, put some brownish red into Guildea's always thin cheeks. His keen eyes were shining with life and energy, and he walked forward in his loose grey suit and fluttering overcoat with a vigour that was noticeable, carrying easily in his left hand his well-filled Gladstone bag.

The Father felt completely reassured.

"I never saw you look better," he said.

"I never was better. Have you an hour to spare?"

"Two."

"Good. I'll send my bag up by cab, and we'll walk across the Park to my house and have a cup of tea there. What d'you say?"

"I shall enjoy it."

They walked out of the station yard, past the flower girls and newspaper sellers towards Grosvenor Place.

"And you have had a pleasant time?" the Father said.

"Pleasant enough, and lonely. I left my companion behind me in the passage at Number 100, you know."

"And you'll not find him there now, I feel sure."

"H'm!" ejaculated Guldea. "What a precious weakling you think me, Murchison."

As he spoke he strode forward more quickly, as if moved to emphasise his sensation of bodily vigour.

"A weakling—no. But anyone who uses his brain as persistently as you do yours must require an occasional holiday."

"And I required one very badly, eh?"

"You required one, I believe."

"Well, I've had it. And now we'll see."

The evening was closing in rapidly. They crossed the road at Hyde Park Corner, and entered the Park, in which were a number of people going home from work; men in corduroy trousers, caked with dried mud, and carrying tin cans slung over their shoulders, and flat panniers, in which lay their tools. Some of the younger ones talked loudly or whistled shrilly as they walked.

"Until the evening," murmured Father Murchison to himself.

"What?" asked Guldea.

"I was only quoting the last words of the text, which seems written upon life, especially upon the life of pleasure: 'Man goeth forth to his work, and to his labour.'"

"Ah, those fellows are not half bad fellows to have in an audience. There were a lot of them at the lecture I gave when I first met you, I remember. One of them tried to heckle me. He had a red beard. Chaps with red beards are always hecklers. I laid him low on that occasion. Well, Murchison, and now we're going to see."

"What?"

"Whether my companion has departed."

"Tell me—do you feel any expectation of—well—of again thinking something is there?"

"How carefully you choose language. No, I merely wonder."

"You have no apprehension?"

"Not a scrap. But I confess to feeling curious."

"Then the sea air hasn't taught you to recognise that the whole thing



came from overstrain."

"No," said Guildea, very drily.

He walked on in silence for a minute. Then he added:

"You thought it would?"

"I certainly thought it might."

"Make me realise that I had a sickly, morbid, rotten imagination—eh? Come now, Murchison, why not say frankly that you packed me off to Westgate to get rid of what you considered an acute form of hysteria?"

The Father was quite unmoved by this attack.

"Come now, Guildea," he retorted, "what did you expect me to think? I saw no indication of hysteria in you. I never have. One would suppose you the last man likely to have such a malady. But which is more natural—for me to believe in your hysteria or in the truth of such a story as you told me?"

"You have me there. No, I mustn't complain. Well, there's no hysteria about me now, at any rate."

"And no stranger in your house, I hope."

Father Murchison spoke the last words with earnest gravity, dropping the half-bantering tone—which they had both assumed.

"You take the matter very seriously, I believe," said Guildea, also speaking more gravely.

"How else can I take it? You wouldn't have me laugh at it when you tell me it seriously?"

"No. If we find my visitor still in the house, I may even call upon you to exorcise it, But first I must do one thing."

"And that is?"

"Prove to you, as well as to myself, that it is still there."

"That might be difficult," said the Father, considerably surprised by Guildea's matter-of-fact tone.

"I don't know. If it has remained in my house I think I can find a means: And I shall not be at all surprised if it is still there—despite the Westgate air."

In saying the last words the Professor relapsed into his former tone of dry chaff. The Father could not quite make up his mind whether Guildea was feeling unusually grave or unusually gay. As the two men drew near to Hyde Park Place their conversation died away and they

walked forward silently in the gathering darkness.

"Here we are!" said Gildea at last.

He thrust his key into the door, opened it and let Father Murchison into the passage, following him closely, and banging the door.

"Here we are!" he repeated in a louder voice.

The electric light was turned on in anticipation of his arrival. He stood still and looked round.

"We'll have some tea at once," he said. "Ah, Pitting!"

The pale butler, who had heard the door bang, moved gently forward from the top of the stairs that led to the kitchen, greeted his master respectfully, took his coat and Father Murchison's cloak, and hung them on two pegs against the wall.

"All's right, Pitting? All's as usual?" said Gildea.

"Quite so, sir."

"Bring us up some tea to the library."

"Yes, sir."

Pitting retreated. Gildea waited till he had disappeared, then opened the dining-room door, put his head into the room and kept it there for a moment, standing perfectly still. Presently he drew back into the passage, shut the door, and said:

"Let's go upstairs."

Father Murchison looked at him enquiringly, but made no remark. They ascended the stairs and came into the library. Gildea glanced rather sharply round. A fire was burning on the hearth. The blue curtains were drawn. The bright gleam of the strong electric light fell on the long rows of books, on the writing table—very orderly in consequence of Gildea's holiday—and on the uncovered cage of the parrot. Gildea went up to the cage. Napoleon was sitting humped up on his perch with his feathers ruffled. His long toes, which looked as if they were covered with crocodile skin, clung to the bar. His round and blinking eyes were filmy, like old eyes. Gildea stared at the bird very hard, and then clucked with his tongue against his teeth. Napoleon shook himself, lifted one foot, extended his toes, sidled along the perch to the bars nearest to the Professor and thrust his head against them. Gildea scratched it with his forefinger two or three times, still gazing attentively at the parrot; then he returned to the fire just as Pitting entered with the tea-tray.

Father Murchison was already sitting in an armchair on one side of the fire. Guildea took another chair and began to pour out tea, as Pitting left the room, closing the door gently behind him. The Father sipped his tea, found it hot and set the cup down on a little table at his side.

"You're fond of that parrot, aren't you?" he asked his friend.

"Not particularly. It's interesting to study sometimes. The parrot mind and nature are peculiar."

"How long have you had him?"

"About four years. I nearly got rid of him just before I made your acquaintance. I'm very glad now I kept him."

"Are you? Why is that?"

"I shall probably tell you in a day or two."

The Father took his cup again. He did not press Guildea for an immediate explanation, but when they had both finished their tea he said:

"Well, has the sea-air had the desired effect?"

"No," said Guildea.

The Father brushed some crumbs from the front of his cassock and sat up higher in his chair.

"Your visitor is still here?" he asked, and his blue eyes became almost ungentle and piercing as he gazed at his friend.

"Yes," answered Guildea, calmly.

"How do you know it, when did you know it—when you looked into the dining-room just now?"

"No. Not until I came into this room. It welcomed me here."

"Welcomed you! In what way?"

"Simply by being here, by making me feel that it is here, as I might feel that a man was if I came into the room when it was dark."

He spoke quietly, with perfect composure in his usual dry manner.

"Very well," the Father said, "I shall not try to contend against your sensation, or to explain it away. Naturally, I am in amazement."

"So am I. Never has anything in my life surprised me so much. Murchison, of course I cannot expect you to believe more than that I honestly suppose—imagine, if you like—that there is some intruder here, of what kind I am totally unaware. I cannot expect you to believe that there really is anything. If you were in my place, I in yours, I should certainly consider you the victim of some nervous delusion. I could not do otherwise. But—wait. Don't condemn me as a hysteria

patient, or as a madman, for two or three days. I feel convinced that—unless I am indeed unwell, a mental invalid, which I don't think is possible—I shall be able very shortly to give some proof that there is a newcomer in my house."

"You don't tell me what kind of proof?"

"Not yet. Things must go a little farther first. But, perhaps even tomorrow I may be able to explain myself more fully. In the meanwhile, I'll say this, that if, eventually, I can't bring any kind of proof that I'm not dreaming, I'll let you take me to any doctor you like, and I'll resolutely try to adopt your present view—that I'm suffering from an absurd delusion. That is your view, of course?"

Father Murchison was silent for a moment. Then he said, rather doubtfully:

"It ought to be."

"But isn't it?" asked Guildea, surprised.

"Well, you know, your manner is enormously convincing. Still, of course, I doubt. How can I do otherwise? The whole thing must be fancy."

The Father spoke as if he were trying to recoil from a mental position he was being forced to take up.

"It must be fancy," he repeated.

"I'll convince you by more than my manner, or I'll not try to convince you at all," said Guildea.

When they parted that evening, he said:

"I'll write to you in a day or two probably. I think the proof I am going to give you has been accumulating during my absence. But I shall soon know."

Father Murchison was extremely puzzled as he sat on the top of the omnibus going homeward.

#### IV

In two days' time he received a note from Guildea asking him to call, if possible, the same evening. This he was unable to do as he had an engagement to fulfil at some East End gathering. The following day was Sunday. He wrote saying he would come on the Monday, and got a wire shortly afterwards: "Yes, Monday come to dinner seven-thirty Guildea."

At half-past seven he stood on the doorstep of Number 100.

Pitting let him in.

"Is the Professor quite well, Pitting?" the Father inquired as he took off his cloak.

"I believe so, sir. He has not made any complaint," the butler formally replied. "Will you come upstairs, sir?"

Guildea met them at the door of the library. He was very pale and sombre, and shook hands carelessly with his friend.

"Give us dinner," he said to Pitting.

As the butler retired, Guildea shut the door rather cautiously. Father Murchison had never before seen him look so disturbed.

"You're worried, Guildea," the Father said. "Seriously worried."

"Yes, I am. This business is beginning to tell on me a good deal."

"Your belief in the presence of something here continues then?"

"Oh, dear, yes. There's no sort of doubt about the matter. The night I went across the road into the Park something got into the house, though what the devil it is I can't yet find out. But now, before we go down to dinner, I'll just tell you something about that proof I promised you. You remember?"

"Naturally."

"Can't you imagine what it might be?"

Father Murchison moved his head to express a negative reply.

"Look about the room," said Guildea, "What do you see?"

The Father glanced round the room, slowly and carefully.

"Nothing unusual. You do not mean to tell me there is any appearance of——"

"Oh, no, no, there's no conventional, white-robed, cloud-like figure. Bless my soul, no! I haven't fallen so low as that."

He spoke with considerable irritation.

"Look again."

Father Murchison looked at him, turned in the direction of his fixed eyes and saw the grey parrot clambering in its cage, slowly and persistently.

"What?" he said, quickly. "Will the proof come from there?"

The Professor nodded.

"I believe so," he said. "Now let's go down to dinner. I want some food badly."

They descended to the dining-room. While they ate and Pitting waited upon them, the Professor talked about birds, their habits, their curiosities, their fears and their powers of imitation. He had evidently studied this subject with the thoroughness that was characteristic of him in all that he did.

"Parrots," he said presently, "are extraordinarily observant. It is a pity that their means of reproducing what they see are so limited. If it were not so, I have little doubt that their echo of gesture would be as remarkable as their echo of voice often is."

"But hands are missing."

"Yes. They do many things with their heads, however. I once knew an old woman near Goring on the Thames. She was afflicted with the palsy. She held her head perpetually sideways and it trembled, moving from right to left. Her sailor son brought her home a parrot from one of his voyages. It used to reproduce the old woman's palsied movement of the head exactly. Those grey parrots are always on the watch."

Gildea said the last sentence slowly and deliberately, glancing sharply over his wine at Father Murchison, and, when he had spoken it, a sudden light of comprehension dawned in the Priest's mind. He opened his lips to make a swift remark. Gildea turned his bright eyes towards Pitting, who at the moment was tenderly bearing a cheese meringue from the lift that connected the diningroom with the lower regions. The Father closed his lips again. But presently, when the butler had placed some apples on the table, had meticulously arranged the decanters, brushed away the crumbs and evaporated, he said, quickly:

"I begin to understand. You think Napoleon is aware of the intruder?"

"I know it. He has been watching my visitant ever since the night of that visitant's arrival."

Another flash of light came to the Priest.

"That was why you covered him with green baize one evening?"

"Exactly. An act of cowardice. His behaviour was beginning to grate upon my nerves."

Gildea pursued up his thin lips and drew his brows down, giving to his face a look of sudden pain.

"But now I intend to follow his investigations," he added, straightening his features. "The week I wasted at Westgate was not wasted by him

in London, I can assure you. Have an apple."

"No, thank you; no, thank you."

The Father repeated the words without knowing that he did so. Guildea pushed away his glass.

"Let us come upstairs, then."

"No, thank you," reiterated the Father.

"Eh?"

"What am I saying?" exclaimed the Father, getting up. "I was thinking over this extraordinary affair."

"Ah, you're beginning to forget the hysteria theory?"

They walked out into the passage.

"Well, you are so very practical about the whole matter."

"Why not? Here's something very strange and abnormal come into my life. What should I do but investigate it closely and calmly?"

"What, indeed?"

The Father began to feel rather bewildered, under a sort of compulsion which seemed laid upon him to give earnest attention to a matter that ought to strike him—so he felt—as entirely absurd. When they came into the library his eyes immediately turned, with profound curiosity, towards the parrot's cage. A slight smile curled the Professor's lips. He recognised the effect he was producing upon his friend. The Father saw the smile.

"Oh, I'm not won over yet," he said in answer to it.

"I know. Perhaps you may be before the evening is over. Here comes the coffee. After we have drunk it we'll proceed to our experiment. Leave the coffee, Pitting, and don't disturb us again."

"No, sir."

"I won't have it back to-night," said the Father, "plenty of milk, please. I don't want my nerves played upon."

"Suppose we don't take coffee at all?" said Guildea. "If we do, you may trot out the theory that we are not in a perfectly normal condition. I know you, Murchison, devout Priest and devout sceptic."

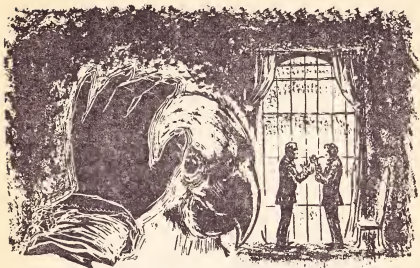
The Father laughed and pushed away his cup.

"Very well, then. No coffee."

"One cigarette, and then to business."

The grey blue smoke curled up.

"What are we going to do?" said the Father.



He was sitting bolt upright as if ready for action. Indeed there was no suggestion of repose in the attitudes of either of the men.

"Hide ourselves, and watch Napoleon. By the way—that reminds me."

He got up, went to a corner of the room, picked up a piece of green baize and threw it over the cage.

"I'll pull that off when we are hidden."

"And tell me first if you have had any manifestation of this supposed presence during the last few days?"

"Merely an increasingly intense sensation of something here, perpetually watching me, perpetually attending to all my doings."

"Do you feel that it follows you about?"

"Not always. It was in this room when you arrived. It is here now—I feel. But, in going down to dinner, we seemed to get away from it. The conclusion is that it remained here. Don't let us talk about it just now."

They spoke of other things till their cigarettes were finished. Then, as they threw away the smouldering ends, Gildea said:

"Now, Murchison, for the sake of this experiment, I suggest that we should conceal ourselves behind the curtains on either side of the cage, so that the bird's attention may not be drawn towards us and so distracted from that which we want to know more about. I will pull away



the green baize when we are hidden. Keep perfectly still, watch the bird's proceedings, and tell me afterwards how you feel about them, how you explain them. Tread softly."

The Father obeyed, and they stole towards the curtains that fell before the two windows. The Father concealed himself behind those on the left of the cage, the Professor behind those on the right. The latter, as soon as they were hidden, stretched out his arm, drew the baize down from the cage, and let it fall on the floor.

The parrot, which had evidently fallen asleep in the warm darkness, moved on its perch as the light shone upon it, ruffled the feathers round its throat, and lifted first one foot and then the other. It turned its head round on its supple, and apparently elastic, neck, and, diving its beak into the down upon its back, made some searching investigations with, as it seemed, a satisfactory result, for it soon lifted its head again, glanced around its cage, and began to address itself to a nut which had been fixed between the bars for its refreshment. With its curved beak it felt and tapped the nut, at first gently, then with severity. Finally it plucked the nut from the bars, seized it with its rough, gray toes, and, holding it down firmly on the perch, cracked it and pecked out its contents, scattering some on the floor of the cage and letting the fractured shell fall into the china bath that was fixed against the bars. This accomplished, the bird paused meditatively, extended one leg backwards, and went through an elaborate process of wing-stretching that made it look as if it were lopsided and deformed. With its head reversed, it again applied itself to a subtle and exhaustive search among the feathers of its wing. This time its investigation seemed interminable, and Father Murchison had time to realise the absurdity of the whole position, and to wonder why he had lent himself to it. Yet he did not find his sense of humour laughing at it. On the contrary, he was smitten by a sudden gust of horror. When he was talking to his friend and watching him, the Professor's manner, generally so calm, even so prosaic, vouched for the truth of his story and the well-adjusted balance of his mind. But when he was hidden this was not so. And Father Murchison, standing behind his curtain, with his eyes upon the unconcerned Napoleon, began to whisper to himself the word—madness, with a quickening sensation of pity and of dread.

The parrot sharply contracted one wing, ruffled the feathers around

its throat again, then extended its other leg backwards, and proceeded to the cleaning of its other wing. In the still room the dry sound of the feathers being spread was distinctly audible. Father Murchison saw the blue curtains behind which Gildea stood tremble slightly, as if a breath of wind had come through the window they shrouded. The clock in the far room chimed, and a coal dropped into the grate, making a noise like dead leaves stirring abruptly on hard ground. And again a gust of pity and of dread swept over the Father. It seemed to him that he had behaved very foolishly, if not wrongly, in encouraging what must surely be the strange dementia of his friend. He ought to have declined to lend himself to a proceeding that, ludicrous, even childish in itself, might well be dangerous in the encouragement it gave to a diseased expectation. Napoleon's protruding leg, extended wing and twisted neck, his busy and unconscious devotion to the arrangement of his person, his evident sensation of complete loneliness, most comfortable solitude, brought home with vehemence to the Father the undignified buffoonery of his conduct; the more piteous buffoonery of his friend. He seized the curtains with his hands and was about to thrust them aside and issue forth, when an abrupt movement of the parrot stopped him. The bird, as if sharply attracted by something, paused in its pecking, and, with its head still bent backward and twisted sideways on its neck, seemed to listen intently. Its round eye looked glistening and strained, like the eye of a disturbed pigeon. Contracting its wing, it lifted its head and sat for a moment erect on its perch, shifting its feet mechanically up and down, as if a dawning excitement produced in it an uncontrollable desire of movement. Then it thrust its head forward in the direction of the further room and remained perfectly still. Its attitude so strongly suggested the concentration of its attention on something immediately before it, that Father Murchison instinctively stared about the room, half expecting to see Pitting advance softly, having entered through the hidden door. He did not come, and there was no sound in the chamber. Nevertheless, the parrot was obviously getting excited and increasingly attentive. It bent its head lower and lower, stretching out its neck until, almost falling from the perch, it half extended its wings, raising them slightly from its back, as if about to take flight, and fluttering them rapidly up and down. It continued this fluttering movement for what seemed to the Father an immense time. At length, raising its wings as

far as possible, it dropped them slowly and deliberately down to its back, caught hold of the edge of its bath with its beak, hoisted itself on to the floor of the cage, waddled to the bars, thrust its head against them, and stood quite still in the exact attitude it always assumed when its head was being scratched by the Professor. So complete was the suggestion of this delight conveyed by the bird, that Father Murchison felt as if he saw a white finger gently pushed among the soft feathers of its head, and he was seized by a most strong conviction that something, unseen by him but seen and welcomed by Napoleon, stood immediately before the cage.

The parrot presently withdrew its head, as if the coaxing finger had been lifted from it, and its pronounced air of acute physical enjoyment faded into one of marked attention and alert curiosity. Pulling itself up by the bars it climbed again upon its perch, sidled to the left side of the cage, and began apparently to watch something with profound interest. It bowed its head oddly, paused for a moment, then bowed its head again. Father Murchison found himself conceiving—from this elaborate movement of the head—a distinct idea of a personality. The bird's proceedings suggested extreme sentimentality combined with that sort of weak determination which is often the most persistent. Such weak determination is a very common attribute of persons who are partially idiotic. Father Murchison was moved to think of these poor creatures who will often, so strangely and unreasonably, attach themselves with persistence to those who love them least. Like many priests, he had had some experience of them, for the amorous idiot is peculiarly sensitive to the attraction of preachers. This bowing movement of the parrot recalled to his memory a terrible, pale woman who for a time haunted all churches in which he ministered, who was perpetually endeavouring to catch his eye, and who always bent her head with an obsequious and cunningly conscious smile when she did so. The parrot went on bowing, making a short pause between each genuflection, as if it waited for a signal to be given that called into play its imitative faculty.

"Yes, yes, it's imitating an idiot," Father Murchison caught himself saying as he watched.

And he looked again about the room, but saw nothing; except the furniture, the dancing fire, and the serried ranks of the books. Presently the parrot ceased from bowing, and assumed the concentrated and

stretched attitude of one listening very keenly. He opened his beak, showing his black tongue, shut it, then opened it again. The Father thought he was going to speak, but he remained silent, although it was obvious that he was trying to bring out something. He bowed again two or three times, paused, and then, again opening his beak, made some remark. The Father could not distinguish any words, but the voice was sickly and disagreeable, a cooing and, at the same time, querulous voice, like a woman's, he thought. And he put his ear nearer to the curtain, listening with almost feverish attention. The bowing was resumed, but this time Napoleon added to it a sidling movement, affectionate and affected, like the movement of a silly and eager thing, nestling up to someone, or giving someone a gentle and furtive nudge. Again then Father thought of that terrible, pale woman who had haunted churches. Several times he had come upon her waiting for him after evening services. Once she had hung her head smiling, and lolled out her tongue and pushed against him sideways in the dark. He remembered how his flesh had shrunk from the poor thing, the sick loathing of her that he could not banish by remembering that her mind was all astray. The parrot paused, listened, opened his beak, and again said something in the same dove-like, amorous voice, full of sickly suggestion and yet hard, even dangerous, in its intonation. A loathsome voice, the Father thought it. But this time, although he heard the voice more distinctly than before, he could not make up his mind whether it was like a woman's voice or a man's—or perhaps a child's. It seemed to be a human voice, and yet oddly sexless. In order to resolve his doubt he withdrew into the darkness of the curtains, ceased to watch Napoleon and simply listened with keen attention, striving to forget that he was listening to a bird, and to imagine that he was overhearing a human being in conversation. After two or three minutes' silence the voice spoke again, and at some length, apparently repeating several times an affectionate series of ejaculations with a cooing emphasis that was unutterably mawkish and offensive. The sickliness of the voice, its falling intonations and its strange indelicacy, combined with a die-away softness and meretricious refinement, made the Father's flesh creep. Yet he could not distinguish any words, nor could he decide on the voice's sex or age. One thing alone he was certain of as he stood still in the darkness—that such a sound could only proceed from something peculiarly loathsome,

could only express a personality unendurably abominable to him, if not to everybody. The voice presently failed, in a sort of husky gasp, and there was a prolonged silence. It was broken by the Professor, who suddenly pulled away the curtains that hid the Father and said to him:

"Come out now, and look."

The Father came into the light, blinking, glanced towards the cage, and saw Napoleon poised motionless on one foot with his head under his wing. He appeared to be asleep. The Professor was pale, and his mobile lips were drawn into an expression of supreme disgust.

"Faugh!" he said.

He walked to the windows of the further room, pulled aside the curtains and pushed the glass up, letting in the air. The bare trees were visible in the grey gloom outside. Guildea leaned out for a minute drawing the night air into his lungs. Presently he turned round to the Father, and exclaimed abruptly:

"Pestilent! Isn't it?"

"Yes—most pestilent."

"Ever hear anything like it?"

"Not exactly."

"Nor I. It gives me nausea, Murchison, absolute physical nausea."

He closed the window and walked uneasily about the room.

"What d'you make of it?" he asked, over his shoulder.

"How d'you mean exactly?"

"Is it man's, woman's, or child's voice?"

"I can't tell, I can't make up my mind."

"Nor I."

"Have you heard it often?"

"Yes, since I returned from Westgate. There are never any words that I can distinguish. What a voice!"

He spat into the fire.

"Forgive me," he said, throwing himself down in a chair. "It turns my stomach—literally."

"And mine," said the Father truly.

"The worst of it is," continued Guildea, with a high, nervous accent, "that there's no brain with it, none at all—only the cunning of idiocy."

The Father started at this exact expression of his own conviction by another.

"Why d'you start like that?" asked Guildea, with a quick suspicion which showed the unnatural condition of his nerves.

"Well, the very same idea had occurred to me."

"What?"

"That I was listening to the voice of something idiotic."

"Ah! That's the devil of it, you know, to a man like me. I could fight against brain—but this!"

He sprang up again, poked the fire violently, then stood on the hearth-rug with his back to it, and his hands thrust into the high pockets of his trousers.

"That's the voice of the thing that's got into my house," he said. "Pleasant, isn't it?"

And now there was really horror in his eyes, and his voice.

"I must get it out," he exclaimed. "I must get it out. But how?"

He tugged at his short black beard with a quivering hand.

"How?" he continued. "For what is it? Where is it?"

"You feel it's here—now?"

"Undoubtedly. But I couldn't tell you in what part of the room."

He stared about, glancing rapidly at everything.

"Then you consider yourself haunted?" said Father Murchison.

He, too, was much moved and disturbed, although he was not conscious of the presence of anything near them in the room.

"I have never believed in any nonsense of that kind, as you know," Guildea answered. "I simply state a fact, which I cannot understand, and which is beginning to be very painful to me. There is something here. But whereas most so-called hauntings have been described to me as inimical, what I am conscious of is that I am admired, loved, desired. This is distinctly horrible to me, Murchison, distinctly horrible."

Father Murchison suddenly remembered the first evening he had spent with Guildea, and the latter's expression almost of disgust, at the idea of receiving warm affection from anyone. In the light of that long ago conversation, the present event seemed supremely strange, and almost like a punishment for an offence committed by the Professor against humanity. But, looking up at his friend's twitching face, the Father resolved not to be caught in the net of his hideous belief.

"There can be nothing here," he said. "It's impossible."

"What does that bird imitate, then?"

"The voice of someone who has been here."

"Within the last week then. For it never spoke like that before, and mind, I noticed that it was watching and striving to imitate something before I went away, since the night that I went into the Park, only since then."

"Somebody with a voice like that must have been here while you were away," Father Murchison repeated, with a gentle obstinacy.

"I'll soon find out."

Guildea pressed the bell. Pitting stole in almost immediately.

"Pitting," said the Professor, speaking in a high, sharp voice, "did anyone come into this room during my absence at the sea?"

"Certainly not, sir, except the maids—and me, sir."

"Not a soul? You are certain?"

"Perfectly certain, sir."

The cold voice of the butler sounded surprised, almost resentful. The Professor flung out his hand towards the cage.

"Has the bird been here the whole time?"

"Yes, sir."

"He was not moved, taken elsewhere, even for a moment?"

Pitting's pale face began to look almost expressive, and his lips were pursed.

"Certainly not, sir."

"Thank you. That will do."

The butler retired, moving with a sort of ostentatious rectitude. When he had reached the door, and was just going out, his master called:

"Wait a minute, Pitting."

The butler paused. Guildea bit his lips, tugged at his beard uneasily two or three times, and then said:

"Have you noticed—er—the parrot talking lately in a—a very peculiar, very disagreeable voice?"

"Yes, sir—a soft voice like, sir."

"Ha! Since when?"

"Since you went away, sir. He's always at it."

"Exactly. Well, and what did you think of it?"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"What do you think about his talking in this voice?"

"Oh, that it's only his play, sir."

"I see. That's all, Pitting."

The butler disappeared and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

Guldea turned his eyes on his friend.

"There, you see!" he ejaculated.

"It's certainly very odd," said the Father. "Very odd indeed. You are certain you have no maid who talks at all like that?"

"My dear Murchison! Would you keep a servant with such a voice about you for two days?"

"No."

"My housemaid has been with me for five years, my cook for seven. You've heard Pitting speak. The three of them make up my entire household. A parrot never speaks in a voice it has not heard. Where has it heard that voice?"

"But we hear nothing?"

"No. Nor do we see anything. But it does. It feels something too. Didn't you observe it presenting its head to be scratched?"

"Certainly it seemed to be doing so."

"It was doing so."

Father Murchison said nothing. He was full of increasing discomfort that almost amounted to apprehension.

"Are you convinced?" said Guldea, rather irritably.

"No. The whole matter is very strange. But till I hear, see or feel—as you do—the presence of something, I cannot believe."

"You mean that you will not?"

"Perhaps. Well, it is time I went."

Guldea did not try to detain him, but said, as he let him out:

"Do me a favour, come again to-morrow night."

The Father had an engagement. He hesitated, looked into the Professor's face and said:

"I will. At nine I'll be with you. Good-night."

When he was on the pavement he felt relieved. He turned round, saw Guldea stepping into his passage, and shivered.

V

Father Murchison walked all the way home to Bird Street that night. He required exercise after the strange and disagreeable evening he had spent, an evening upon which he looked back already as a man looks



back upon a nightmare. In his ears, as he walked, sounded the gentle and intolerable voice. Even the memory of it caused him physical discomfort. He tried to put it from him, and to consider the whole matter calmly. The Professor had offered his proof that there was some strange presence in his house. Could any reasonable man accept such proof? Father Murchison told himself that no reasonable man could accept it. The parrot's proceedings were, no doubt, extraordinary. The bird had succeeded in producing an extraordinary illusion of an invisible presence in the room. But that there really was such a presence the Father insisted on denying to himself. The devoutly religious, those who believed implicitly in the miracles recorded in the Bible, and who regulate their lives by the messages they suppose themselves to receive directly from the Great Ruler of a hidden World, are seldom inclined to accept any notion of supernatural intrusion into the affairs of daily life. They put it from them with anxious determination. They regard it fixedly as hocus-pocus, childish if not wicked.

Father Murchison inclined to the normal view of the devoted churchman. He was determined to incline to it. He could not—so he now told himself—accept the idea that his friend was being supernaturally punished for his lack of humanity, his deficiency in affection, by being obliged to endure the love of some horrible thing, which could not be seen, heard, or handled. Nevertheless, retribution did certainly seem to wait upon Guildea's condition. That which he had unnaturally dreaded and shrunk from in his thought he seemed to be now forced unnaturally to suffer. The Father prayed for his friend that night before the little, humble altar in the barely-furnished, cell-like chamber where he slept.

On the following evening, when he called in Hyde Park Place, the door was opened by the housemaid, and Father Murchison mounted the stairs, wondering what had become of Pitting. He was met at the library door by Guildea and was painfully struck by the alteration in his appearance. His face was ashen in hue, and there were lines beneath his eyes. The eyes themselves looked excited and horribly forlorn. His hair and dress were disordered and his lips twitched continually, as if he were shaken by some acute nervous apprehension.

"What has become of Pitting?" asked the Father, grasping Guildea's hot and feverish hand.

"He has left my service."

"Left your service!" exclaimed the Father in utter amazement.

"Yes, this afternoon."

"May one ask why?"

"I'm going to tell you. It's all part and parcel of this—this most odious business. You remember once discussing the relations men ought to have with their servants?"

"Ah!" cried the Father, with a flash of inspiration. "The crisis has occurred?"

"Exactly," said the Professor, with a bitter smile. "The crisis has occurred. I called upon Pitting to be a man and a brother. He responded by declining the invitation. I upbraided him. He gave me warning. I paid him his wages and told him he could go at once. And he has gone. What are you looking at me like that for?"

"I didn't know," said Father Murchison, hastily dropping his eyes, and looking away. "Why," he added. "Napoleon is gone too."

"I sold him to-day to one of those shops in Shaftesbury Avenue."

"Why?"

"He sickened me with his abominable imitation of—his intercourse with—well, you know what he was at last night. Besides, I have no further need of his proof to tell me I am not dreaming. And, being convinced as I now am, that all I have thought to have happened has actually happened, I care very little about convincing others. Forgive me for saying so, Murchison, but I am now certain that my anxiety to make you believe in the presence of something here really arose from some faint doubt on that subject—within myself. All doubt has now vanished."

"Tell me why."

"I will."

Both men were standing by the fire. They continued to stand while Gildea went on:

"Last night I felt it."

"What?" cried the Father.

"I say that last night, as I was going upstairs to bed, I felt something accompanying me and nestling up against me."

"How horrible!" exclaimed the Father, involuntarily.

Gildea smiled drearily.

"I will not deny the horror of it. I cannot, since I was compelled to

call on Pitting for assistance."

"But—tell me—what was it, at least what did it seem to be?"

"It seemed to be a human being. It seemed, I say; and what I mean exactly is that the effect upon me was rather that of human contact than of anything else. But I could see nothing, hear nothing. Only, three times, I felt this gentle, but determined, push against me, as if to coax me and to attract my attention. The first time it happened I was on the landing outside this room, with my foot on the first stair. I will confess to you, Murchison, that I bounded upstairs like one pursued. That is the shameful truth. Just as I was about to enter my bedroom, however, I felt the thing entering with me, and, as I have said, squeezing, with loathsome, sickening tenderness, against my side. Then——"

He paused, turned towards the fire and leaned his head on his arm. The Father was greatly moved by the strange helplessness and despair of the attitude. He laid his hand affectionately on Guildea's shoulder.

"Then?"

Guildea lifted his head. He looked painfully abashed.

"Then, Murchison, I am ashamed to say, I broke down, suddenly, unaccountably, in a way I should have thought wholly impossible to me. I struck out with my hands to thrust the thing away. It pressed more closely to me. The pressure, the contact became unbearable to me. I shouted out for Pitting. I—I believe I must have cried—'Help.'"

"He came, of course?"

"Yes, with his usual soft, unemotional quiet. His calm—its opposition to my excitement of disgust and horror—must, I suppose, have irritated me. I was not myself, no, no!"

He stopped abruptly. Then—

"But I need hardly tell you that," he added, with most piteous irony.

"And what did you say to Pitting?"

"I said that he should have been quicker. He begged my pardon. His cold voice really maddened me, and I burst out into some foolish, contemptible diatribe, called him a machine, taunted him, then—as I felt that loathsome thing nestling once more to me—begged him to assist me, to stay with me, not to leave me alone—I mean in the company of my tormentor. Whether he was frightened, or whether he was angry at my unjust and violent manner and speech a moment before, I don't know. In any case he answered that he was engaged as a butler, and not

to sit up all night with people. I suspect he thought I had taken too much to drink. No doubt that was it. I believe I swore at him as a coward—I! This morning he said he wished to leave my service. I gave him a month's wages, a good character as a butler, and sent him off at once."

"But the night? How did you pass it?"

"I sat up all night."

"Where? In your bedroom?"

"Yes—with the door open—to let it go."

"You felt that it stayed?"

"It never left me for a moment, but it did not touch me again. When it was light I took a bath, lay down for a little while, but did not close my eyes. After breakfast I had the explanation with Pitting and paid him. Then I came up here. My nerves were in a very shattered condition. Well, I sat down, tried to write, to think. But the silence was broken in the most abominable manner."

"How?"

"By the murmur of that appalling voice, that voice of a love-sick idiot, sickly but determined. Ugh!"

He shuddered in every limb. Then he pulled himself together, assumed, with a self-conscious effort, his most determined, most aggressive, manner, and added:

"I couldn't stand that. I had come to the end of my tether; so I sprang up, ordered a cab to be called, seized the cage and drove with it to a bird shop in Shaftesbury Avenue. There I sold the parrot for a trifle. I think, Murchison, that I must have been nearly mad then, for, as I came out of the wretched shop, and stood for an instant on the pavement among the cages of rabbits, guinea-pigs, and puppy dogs, I laughed aloud. I felt as if a load was lifted from my shoulders, as if in selling that voice I had sold the cursed thing that torments me. But when I got back to the house it was here. It's here now. I suppose it will always be here."

He shuffled his feet on the rug in front of the fire.

"What on earth am I to do?" he said. "I'm ashamed of myself, Murchison, but I suppose there are things in the world that certain men simply can't endure. Well, I can't endure this, and there's an end of the matter."

He ceased. The Father was silent. In presence of this extraordinary

distress he did not know what to say. He recognised the uselessness of attempting to comfort Guildea, and he sat with his eyes turned, almost moodily, to the ground. And while he sat there he tried to give himself to the influences within the room, to feel all that was within it. He even, half-unconsciously, tried to force his imagination to play tricks with him. But he remained totally unaware of any third person with them. At length he said:

"Guildea, I cannot pretend to doubt the reality of your misery here. You must go away, and at once. When is your Paris lecture?"

"Next week. In nine days from now."

"Go to Paris to-morrow then; you say you have never had any consciousness that this—this thing pursued you beyond your own front door!"

"Never—hitherto."

"Go to-morrow morning. Stay away till after your lecture. And then let us see if the affair is at an end. Hope, my dear friend, hope."

He had stood up. Now he clasped the Professor's hand.

"See all your friends in Paris. Seek distractions. I would ask you also to seek—other help."

He said the last words with a gentle, earnest gravity and simplicity that touched Guildea, who returned his handclasp almost warmly.

"I'll go," he said. "I'll catch the ten o'clock train, and tonight I'll sleep at an hotel, at the Grosvenor—that's close to the station. It will be more convenient for the train."

As Father Murchison went home that night he kept thinking of that sentence: "It will be more convenient for the train." The weakness in Guildea that had prompted its utterance appalled him.

## VI

No letter came to Father Murchison from the Professor during the next few days, and this silence reassured him, for it seemed to betoken that all was well. The day of the lecture dawned, and passed. On the following morning, the Father eagerly opened the *Times*, and scanned its pages to see if there were any report of the great meeting of scientific men which Guildea had addressed. He glanced up and down the columns with anxious eyes, then suddenly his hands stiffened as they

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held the sheets. He had come upon the following paragraph:

"We regret to announce that Professor Frederic Guildea was suddenly seized with severe illness yesterday evening while addressing a scientific meeting in Paris. It was observed that he looked very pale and nervous when he rose to his feet. Nevertheless, he spoke in French fluently for about a quarter of an hour. Then he appeared to become uneasy. He faltered and glanced about like a man apprehensive, or in severe distress. He even stopped once or twice, and seemed unable to go on, to remember what he wished to say. But, pulling himself together with an obvious effort, he continued to address the audience. Suddenly, however, he paused again, edged furtively along the platform, as if pursued by something which he feared, struck out with his hands, uttered a loud, harsh cry and fainted. The sensation in the hall was indescribable. People rose from their seats. Women screamed, and, for a moment, there was a veritable panic. It is feared that the Professor's mind must have temporarily given way owing to overwork. We understand that he will return to England as soon as possible, and we sincerely hope that necessary rest and quiet will soon have the desired effect, and that he will be completely restored to health and enabled to prosecute further the investigations which have already so benefited the world."

The Father dropped the paper, hurried out into Bird Street, sent a wire of inquiry to Paris, and received the same day the following reply: "Returning to-morrow. Please call evening. Guildea." On that evening the Father called in Hyde Park Place, was at once admitted, and found Guildea sitting by the fire in the library, ghastly pale, with a heavy rug over his knees. He looked like a man emaciated by a long and severe illness, and in his wide open eyes there was an expression of fixed horror. The Father started at the sight of him, and could scarcely refrain from crying out. He was beginning to express his sympathy when Guildea stopped him with a trembling gesture.

"I know all that," Guildea said, "I know. This Paris affair——" He faltered and stopped.

"You ought never to have gone," said the Father. "I was wrong. I ought not to have advised your going. You were not fit."

"I was perfectly fit," he answered, with the irritability of sickness. "But I was—I was accompanied by that abominable thing."

He glanced hastily round him, shifted his chair and pulled the rug higher over his knees. The Father wondered why he was thus wrapped up. For the fire was bright and red and the night was not very cold.

"I was accompanied to Paris," he continued, pressing his upper teeth upon his lower lip.

He paused again, obviously striving to control himself. But the effort was vain. There was no resistance in the man. He writhed in his chair and suddenly burst forth in a tone of hopeless lamentation.

"Murchison, this being, thing—whatever it is—no longer leaves me even for a moment. It will not stay here unless I am here, for it loves me persistently, idiotically. It accompanied me to Paris, stayed with me there, pursued me to the lecture hall, pressed against me, caressed me while I was speaking. It has returned with me here. It is here now," —he uttered a sharp cry—"now, as I sit here with you. It is nestling up to me, fawning upon me, touching my hands. Man, man, can't you feel that it is here?"

"No," the Father answered truly.

"I try to protect myself from its loathsome contact," Guildea continued, with fierce excitement, clutching the thick rug with both hands. "But nothing is of any avail against it. Nothing. What is it? What can it be? Why should it have come to me that night?"

"Perhaps as a punishment," said the Father, with a quick softness.

"For what?"

"You hated affection. You put human feeling aside with contempt. You had, you desired to have, no love for anyone. Nor did you desire to receive any love from anything. Perhaps this is a punishment."

Guildea stared into his face.

"D'you believe that?" he cried.

"I don't know," said the Father. "But it may be so. Try to endure it, even to welcome it. Possibly then the persecution will cease."

"I know it means me no harm," Guildea exclaimed, "it seeks me out of affection. It was led to me by some amazing attraction which I exercise over it ignorantly. I know that. But to a man of my nature that is the ghastly part of the matter. If it would hate me, I could bear it. If it would attack me, if it would try to do me some dreadful harm, I should become a man again. I should be braced to fight against it. But this gentleness, this abominable solicitude, this brainless worship of an



idiot, persistent, sickly, horribly physical, I cannot endure. What does it want of me? What would it demand of me? It nestles to me. It leans against me. I feel its touch, like the touch of a feather, trembling about my heart, as if it sought to number my pulsations, to find out the inmost secrets of my impulses and desires. No privacy is left to me." He sprang up excitedly. "I cannot withdraw," he cried, "I cannot be alone, untouched, unworshipped, unwatched for even one-half second. Murchison, I am dying of this, I am dying."

He sank down again in his chair, staring apprehensively on all sides, with the passion of some blind man, deluded in the belief that by his furious and continued effort he will attain sight. The Father knew well that he sought to pierce the veil of the invisible, and have knowledge of the thing that loved him.

"Guildea," the Father said, with insistent earnestness, "try to endure this—do more—try to give this thing what it seeks."

— "But it seeks my love."

"Learn to give it your love and it may go, having received what it came for."

"T'sh! You talk like a priest. Suffer your persecutors. Do good to them that spitefully use you. You talk as a priest."

"As a friend I spoke naturally, indeed, right out of my heart. The idea suddenly came to me that all this—truth or seeming, it doesn't matter which—may be some strange form of lesson. I have had lessons—painful ones. I shall have many more. If you could welcome——"

"I can't! I can't!" Guildea cried fiercely. "Hatred! I can give it that—always that, nothing but that—hatred, hatred."

He raised his voice, glared into the emptiness of the room, and repeated, "Hatred!"

As he spoke the waxen pallor of his cheeks increased, until he looked like a corpse with living eyes. The Father feared that he was going to collapse and faint, but suddenly he raised himself upon his chair and said, in a high and keen voice, full of suppressed excitement:

"Murchison, Murchison!"

"Yes. What is it?"

An amazing ecstasy shone in Guildea's eyes.

"It wants to leave me" he cried. "It wants to go! Don't lose a moment! Let it out! The window—the window!"

The Father, wondering, went to the near window, drew aside the

curtains and pushed it open. The branches of the trees in the garden creaked drily in the light wind. Gildea leaned forward on the arms of his chair. There was silence for a moment. Then Gildea, speaking in rapid whisper, said:

"No, no. Open this door—open the hall door. I feel—I feel that it will return the way it came. Make haste—ah, go!"

The Father obeyed—to soothe him, hurried to the door and opened it wide. Then he glanced back to Gildea. He was standing up, bent forward. His eyes were glaring with eager expectation, and, as the Father turned, he made a furious gesture towards the passage with his thin hands.

The Father hastened out and down the stairs. As he descended in the twilight he fancied he heard a slight cry from the room behind him, but he did not pause. He flung the hall door open, standing back against the wall. After waiting a moment—to satisfy Gildea, he was about to close the door again, and had his hand on it, when he was attracted irresistibly to look forth towards the park. The night was lit by a young moon, and, gazing through the railings, his eyes fell upon a bench beyond them.

Upon the bench something was sitting, huddled together very strangely.

The Father remembered instantly Gildea's description of that former night, that night of Advent, and a sensation of horror-stricken curiosity stole through him.

Was there then really something that had indeed come to the Professor? And had it finished its work, fulfilled its desire and gone back to its former existence?

The Father hesitated a moment in the doorway. Then he stepped out resolutely and crossed the road, keeping his eyes fixed upon this black or dark object that leaned so strangely upon the bench. He could not tell yet what it was like, but he fancied it was unlike anything with which his eyes were acquainted. He reached the opposite path, and was about to pass through the gate in the railings, when his arm was brusquely grasped. He started, turned round, and saw a policeman eyeing him suspiciously.

"What are you up to?" said the policeman.

The Father was suddenly aware that he had no hat upon his head,

and that his appearance, as he stole forward in his cassock, with his eyes intently fixed upon the bench in the Park, was probably unusual enough to excite suspicion.

"It's all right, policeman," he answered quickly, thrusting some money into the constable's hand.

Then, breaking from him, the Father hurried towards the bench, bitterly vexed at the interruption. When he reached it, nothing was there. Guildea's experience had been almost exactly repeated and, filled with unreasonable disappointment, the Father returned to the house, entered it, shut the door and hastened up the narrow stairway into the library.

On the hearthrug, close to the fire, he found Guildea lying with his head lolled against the armchair from which he had recently risen. There was a shocking expression of terror on his convulsed face. On examining him the Father found that he was dead.

The doctor, who was called in, said that the cause of death was failure of the heart.

When Father Murchison was told this, he murmured:

"Failure of the heart! It was that then!"

He turned to the doctor and said:

"Could it have been prevented?"

The doctor drew on his gloves and answered:

"Possibly, if it had been taken in time. Weakness of the heart required a great deal of care. The Professor was too much absorbed in his work. He should have lived very differently."

The Father nodded.

"Yes, yes," he said, sadly.

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